

gender spectrum

Understanding Gender:

Gender Identity and Sexual Orientation

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Sexual Orientation: What It Is (and Isn't)

Sexual orientation refers to the people to whom we are attracted, romantically or sexually. Sexual orientation is an inherent part of a person's core identity. Studies show, resolutely, that sexual orientation is not a choice. Absolutely nothing a parent or anyone else does will cause a child to be gay or prevent a child from being lesbian, gay, bisexual, pansexual, or to have any other sexual identity.[1] Unfortunately, many people do not realize this; there is much misinformation about sexual orientation.

Is	Isn't
Who a person is romantically and/or sexually attracted to	A choice
An inherent part of a person's core identity	About attraction
Separate from gender expression	Determined by clothing, hobbies, or behavior
Something that may become clear over time	Something visible in childhood play or style
Valid across many identities (gay, straight, bisexual, pansexual, asexual, etc.)	Limited to one "expected" outcome
About attraction	About how someone looks, dresses, or acts

Why The Distinction Matters

Confusing gender with sexual orientation can lead to assumptions that obscure or even harm a young person's self-understanding.

Many people equate a child's gender expression with perceived sexual orientation. Children who don't follow typical gender expectations may or may not grow up to have a particular sexual orientation, but their gender expression is not a marker of sexual orientation. Plenty of children who don't follow typical gender expectations do not grow up to be gay, and plenty of children who do follow typical gender expectations will be gay.

A young person's comfort within themself is related to the degree to which each of these core aspects of identity: gender identity, gender expression, and (when they are older) sexual orientation feel in harmony. The process of finding harmony within one's gender is called seeking gender congruence (see our PDF on Congruence and the rest of the series on Understanding Gender).

For example:

- A young boy who enjoys wearing dresses and playing princess is often assumed to be gay. But his play preferences (gender expression) tell us nothing about who he'll be attracted to when he's older (sexual orientation) or how he experiences his own gender (gender identity). He might grow up to be straight, gay, or bisexual. He might be cisgender or transgender. His dress-up play is simply one aspect of his gender expression at this moment.
- A girl with short hair who wears "boys'" clothes is often assumed to be a lesbian. But her clothing and hairstyle choices (gender expression) don't determine who she's attracted to (sexual orientation). She may be straight, lesbian, bisexual, or asexual. Her style also doesn't tell us her gender identity: she may identify as a girl, as nonbinary, or something else entirely.
- A teenage boy who identifies as bisexual (sexual orientation) and wears makeup (gender expression) is often mislabeled as gay. People conflate his feminine gender expression with being attracted only to boys, when in fact he's attracted to multiple genders.
- A transgender teenage boy (gender identity) who is attracted to girls (sexual orientation) may be mislabeled as a lesbian because others focus on his assigned sex at birth rather than his actual identity. He is a straight boy, not a lesbian.
- A nonbinary teen (gender identity) who dates girls is often assumed to be a lesbian. But nonbinary isn't female, and their gender identity is separate from who they're attracted to. They might identify as gay, straight, bisexual, or use different terms entirely based on their nonbinary identity.

Key point: We cannot determine someone's sexual orientation from their gender expression, nor can we assume their gender identity from either their expression or their orientation.

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Barriers to Self-Understanding

When society conflates gender and sexual orientation, it can delay or complicate a young person's ability to understand and name what they're feeling.

A transgender or nonbinary youth might initially explore the idea that they're gay or lesbian before recognizing that the feelings they're experiencing are about gender, not attraction.

Conversely, a lesbian, gay, or bisexual youth might question whether they are transgender simply because their attractions don't fit expected gender norms.

Untangling these threads helps young people make sense of their own experience and allows adults to support them more clearly and compassionately.

Separate Journeys, Intersecting Paths

Everyone's process of discovering their gender identity and sexual orientation is unique. These may unfold at different times or even overlap. One may be clear from an early age, while the other takes time to emerge.

It's also normal for either identity to shift or become clearer over time; this is development, not confusion.

Each person makes individual choices about how, when, and to whom they disclose these parts of themselves. Respecting the difference helps create space for more authentic self-expression, clearer communication, and healthier relationships.



> **"It's also normal for either identity to shift or become clearer over time; this is development, not confusion."**

Why It Feels So Confusing: Bodies and Relationships

Another source of confusion is that many people believe physical anatomy determines both gender identity and sexual orientation. For example, consider a transgender woman (someone assigned male at birth who identifies as female) who is attracted to men. Some people struggle with this scenario: "If this person was born male and likes men, aren't they just gay?»

This question reveals a common misunderstanding. Here's why it's incorrect:

- This person's gender identity is female, she is a woman.
- She is attracted to men.
- A woman attracted to men is straight, not gay.
- Her anatomy or natal sex doesn't change her gender identity or sexual orientation.

The confusion often stems from focusing on the body someone was born with rather than who they actually are. But we're learning that both gender identity and sexual orientation are innate aspects of who a person is - not choices, and not things that can or should be changed. When we understand that gender identity comes from within, not from our physical bodies, these relationships make more sense.

Similarly, a transgender man (assigned female at birth) who dates women isn't a lesbian, he's a straight man. His identity as a man, not his sex assigned at birth, determines both who he is and how we understand his relationships.

The key principle: A person's gender identity–not their anatomy or birth assignment–is what matters when understanding both who they are and their sexual orientation.

This shift in thinking can be challenging because many of us were taught that bodies determine everything about gender and sexuality. But just as we've learned that left-handedness isn't something to be "fixed," we're learning that gender identity and sexual orientation are more complex than anatomy alone.

People who don't fit traditional gender expectations are often assumed to be gay, regardless of how they actually identify. For instance, a man who works as a hairstylist or fashion designer might be assumed to be gay, when his profession has nothing to do with his sexual orientation. Similarly, a woman who works in construction might be assumed to be a lesbian. These assumptions blur the line between gender expression and sexual orientation, reinforcing misconceptions.

Focusing on how people understand themselves, rather than making assumptions based on their bodies, creates space for everyone to be more fully seen and understood.



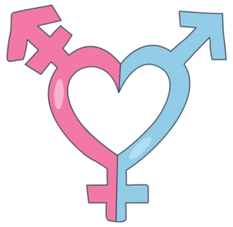
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This Happens in Every Community

These experiences aren't limited to urban areas or certain political groups, or certain ethnicities. Young people in rural communities, suburban neighborhoods, and cities alike are navigating questions about gender identity, gender expression, and sexual orientation. Families from every background, culture, and faith tradition are learning to support their children through these discoveries. This is not about politics or ideology, it's about human development and the universal need to understand ourselves and be understood by those we love.

Pulling It All Together



Gender and sexual orientation are not the same.

- **Gender is about who you are**: your internal sense of self.
- **Sexual orientation is about who you're attracted to**: your emotional, romantic, and/or physical pull toward others.

The most common gender identities include:	The most common sexual orientations include:
Girl/Woman	Straight
Boy/Man	Gay
Transgender	Lesbian
Nonbinary	Bisexual
Agender	Asexual

Two Distinct Aspects of Identity

Every person has both a gender identity and a sexual orientation. These are two separate, core aspects of who we are.

1. **Gender Identity:** our deeply held, internal sense of our own gender
2. **Sexual Orientation:** who we are attracted to, romantically or sexually

Neither is a choice, and neither can be changed through external pressure or intervention. One does not determine the other.

Common Myths About Gender and Sexual Orientation

Myth #1: "If my child doesn't follow typical gender expectations, that means they'll grow up to be gay."
Myth #2: "Being transgender is just a more extreme version of being gay."
Myth #3: "You can tell someone's sexual orientation by how masculine or feminine they act."

Truth #1: Gender expression is not a roadmap to sexual orientation.
Truth #2: Gender identity and sexual orientation are not on the same spectrum.
Truth #3: Gender expression (how someone dresses, acts, or presents) doesn't determine sexual orientation. Masculine women can be straight, feminine men can be straight, and vice versa.

A Closing Message

Gender and sexual orientation can be tender and complicated topics, especially if they challenge what you were taught and expected or hoped for your child. It's okay to feel uncertain or overwhelmed. You're not alone.

But remember: your child isn't asking you to be perfect. They're asking you to stay present. To believe them. To love them as they are, not as you imagined they'd be.

The journey of understanding your child's gender identity and expression, and sexual orientation can be one of the most powerful expressions of love you ever offer. Even when you stumble, your willingness to walk this road together sends a message that lasts a lifetime:

"You are not alone. You are not broken. You are loved."

Your steady, imperfect, honest presence becomes the foundation for your child to have a life of authenticity, resilience, and joy.

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Footnotes: [1] American Psychological Association (2021). Resolution on Sexual Orientation Change Efforts. The APA's 2021 resolution states that gender and sexual orientation are distinct human characteristics and that the characterization of sexual orientation as changeable through treatment is not supported by scientific evidence. The APA maintains that there is no sound scientific evidence that innate sexual orientation can be changed and has consistently opposed conversion efforts since their comprehensive review in 2009.