Gender Across the Grades

The manner in which gender plays out can vary tremendously depending on the child's age. At each level of schooling, there are different issues with which the family, the institution, and the student must grapple. Regardless of the child's age, one important practice is to make sure that you have various resources on hand to help the caregivers understand and develop broader perspectives about gender that might expand their capacity to support their child's (and their own) navigation of this path.

Preschool

Children can very often express "atypical" gender behavior as early as age two or three. This includes a range of behaviors — such as boys playing with dolls or wearing dresses, or girls who adopt boy's names — as well as children who more consistently assert a cross-gendered identity. Increasingly, teachers are discovering that they are caring for children who don't conform to traditional gender norms. Even in these early years, children have already begun to learn from both adults and peers the "gender" of certain toys or clothes, and to police others accordingly.

Many gender-expansive or transgender children at this age are grappling with the necessary language to express their own sense of self. Openly or to themselves, these children are thinking or saying things such as "I want to be a girl when I grow up," "I wish I was a boy" "God made a mistake," "when will I get a penis," or "my heart is a girl but my body is a boy." While some parents are trying to ascertain whether they have a transgender child, others may be unaware of their child's gender-expansiveness. In many cases, families will approach the pre-school educator for reassurance, information, and suggestions about how to respond to the child's characteristics of gender. In fact, this may be the first adult outside of the home with whom the topic is raised. It is important for pre-school teachers and leaders to have a firm understanding of gender development, knowledge of the stages of parental understanding, and examples of other children and families with whom they have worked.

The degree to which the pre-school can help families understand gender as a spectrum, and present positive pathways regardless of the child's ultimate gender identity, will have a significant impact on the health and well being of the family and the child. Not only that, it will also create a sense of trust between the educators and the family. This bond will not only support your own work, but potentially the work of future schools as the family and student come to view educators as allies, rather than barriers, to the true gender authenticity.

Elementary School

Gender diversity is seen across individuals of all ages, but gender non-conforming behavior in preadolescents is particularly visible. Some gender-expansive children may be open and comfortable in expressing themselves. However, most of them are already aware that they do not fit expected gender norms. They may experience negative repercussions at school, and become shy and withdrawn in an attempt to protect themselves from bullying by their peers. Others may exhibit behavioral problems. Some children may have support at home, while others are severely punished for their natural self-expression. Additionally, the lack of support and understanding from teachers,

parents, and other adults exacerbates the already difficult environment created by their peers. Even well intentioned parents sometimes feel they can better protect their child by insisting on gender-conforming behavior at school in an effort to optimize their child's school experience.

Understanding how to supportively address gender identity and expression within the elementary classroom and school is crucial to helping children thrive. This includes developmentally appropriate, explicit lessons on the complexity of gender and the many ways children express it. From the kindergarten class onward, schools must emphasize and protect the fundamental right for all children to simply be themselves. As children move through the grades, attention to gender issues creates safe spaces not only for the transgender or gender-expansive child, but also for all children to explore their full sense of self. Finally, the ability to provide parents with a developmental perspective of gender development in children is also an important characteristic at the elementary school level. This includes building parents' capacity to help their own child to understand and celebrate gender diversity, as well as foreshadowing possible challenges related to gender as the students move towards middle school.

Middle School

Middle school development and consolidation of a core identity marks the transition from child to adolescent. During this period, some young people often display gender-expansiveness or, increasingly, identify as transgender. This can be true for both children who have in some way demonstrated gender-expansiveness previously, as well as for a child who has not. Unfortunately, this also coincides with a time of intense peer pressure for social conformity. This pressure to conform puts gender-expansive adolescents at significantly greater risk, physically and emotionally.

Advocates and many providers who work with transgender youth report that these young people are at very high risk for suicide. While many adolescents present moody and even depressed dispositions during this period, gender-expansive and transgender children are subject to even greater vacillations than their gender normative peers. In the highly pressurized atmosphere of most middle schools, discomfort frequently marks the gender nonconforming child's experiences: discomfort with the social environment, discomfort with their own bodies, discomfort at home. At an age when a child most desperately wants to fit in, gender-expansive adolescents generally do not, and if they do, are terrified of being "found out."

Learning how to recognize a child in distress is a critical skill for any middle school educator. Middle schools play a crucial role in fostering the conditions in which gender diversity is accepted or not. Through strategic and deliberate steps, schools can create truly gender inclusive climates for all students. One fundamental way middle schools can support such an environment is to critically explore gender stereotypes and the social pressures they produce, as well as distinguishing between gender identity and sexual orientation. Other middle-grade considerations include navigating gender-specific spaces, such as sports, bathrooms, and school forms; accommodating name and pronoun preferences; and recognizing basic civil and legal rights for gender-expansive and transgender students.

High School

As students move from the middle grades to high school, the social pressures and decisions they face become increasingly complex. As they seek to understand their own sense of self, these young people are also frequently negotiating social contexts that include dating, relationships and sex. Each of these, and the many other social dynamics playing out for them bring gender to an elevated place of importance and consequence.

High school students frequently have a greater degree of independence than they did as adolescents. This means they may also find themselves in situations in which they must have the skills to keep themselves safe. Whether at a party, out with friends, on a date, or simply being in public, considerations of physical safety must be taken into account. This is true for all youth, but especially so for transgender and other gender expansive teens, who can be targeted by other youth or adults because of their gender diversity.

High schools can play a critical role in supporting the creating a healthy sense of gender among their students. Along with developing a baseline understanding of the complexity of gender, students in high school should be encouraged to explore gender within their own social contexts, at school and elsewhere. In so doing, they become acutely aware of how these concepts are playing out around them. This self-reflection as members of the school community is crucial, because it then places the students as central actors in the process of creating greater gender inclusion for all, and for interrupting the negative patterns pertaining to gender that they may perceive in their midst.

Finally, many high school students are developing their capacity for advocacy and activism. On the brink of adulthood, many high school students are working to create conditions of greater acceptance at their schools. Institutions that explore gender diversity develop in their students an ability to examine multiple forms of identity. These skills to serve as allies across multiple forms of difference will continue as the students transition into post-secondary life, creating the possibility for ever more inclusive communities.