Framework for Gender Inclusive Schools

When someone with the authority of a teacher describes the world and you are not in it, there is a moment of psychic disequilibrium, as if you looked into a mirror and saw nothing.

--Adrienne Rich

Gender inclusive schools…

- Recognize that gender impacts ALL students
- Interrupt binary notions of gender
- Normalize gender diversity
- Question limited portrayals of gender
- Support students' self-reflection
- Teach empathy and respect

Entry Points

When focusing on the **intentional** development of gender inclusive school settings, it is helpful to think in terms of four discrete entry points: Personal, Structural, Interpersonal, and Instructional. Depending on the context, any one of these may prove the best starting point for this work.

Personal entry points focus on individual educators' own understanding of gender and reflection about how each person's experiences and beliefs impact the work they do with students. Using tools such as *My Gender Journey,* this entry point is really an ongoing process of learning upon which teachers build their gender inclusive practices, applying a lens of gender awareness to all they do in their classrooms.

Structural entry points are institutional steps that create a foundation for gender inclusive practices to take hold. Structural entry points demonstrate to your community that the institution recognizes and honors gender diversity and actively works to reflect a more complex understanding about gender. Structural approaches include:

- Policies/Administrative regulations emphasizing gender as an area of diversity protected and supported by the school
- Systematic staff training that builds the capacity of teachers and other staff to honor the gender diversity of all students
- Written materials and information about gender diversity
- Signage/Visuals celebrating gender diversity
- Student information systems allowing families and students the ability to self-identify their gender and use preferred names and pronouns
- Procedures/Forms that demonstrate a non-binary understanding of gender
- Restrooms/Facilities that provide options for privacy without stigmatizing any students

Interpersonal entry points are the various ways in which individual interactions and communications are utilized to reinforce a school's commitment to gender inclusion. Supported by many of the structural components, these relational aspects nonetheless require intentional behaviors in the day-to-day interrelationships of a campus. They literally voice a school's commitment to honoring the gender diversity of all students. Frequently language-based, teachers operating from this entry point:

Use language that challenges binary notions of gender

- *There are lots of ways to be boys and girls. Isn't it great?!?*
- Toys are toys, hair is hair, colors are colors, and clothes are clothes
- *Is there only one way to be a boy or girl? Can boys and girls like the same things?*
- Rather than "boys and girls," "ladies and gentlemen," etc., refer to students as "students," "children," or another non-gendered term for the group.

Help students understand the difference between patterns and rules

- *Who says only girls wear dresses? Do all girls wear them? Do all boys wear dresses? Do some?*
- *What patterns have you observed about expectations for youth about gender from peers? The media?*
- *Sure, boys might do certain activities more than girls (or vice-versa). But that doesn't mean all boys do those things (or are supposed to), or that girls don't (or shouldn't) do them!*

Question limited portrayals of gender

- *Who decided what things are for boys and what things are for girls?*
- *Sometimes this stuff is confusing. We get messages about some things being for boys and some things being for girls. But these messages are just some people's ideas. They may not be right for you.*

Recognize that gender is about our hearts and minds

- *No one gets to tell another person how to feel on the inside.*
- *How someone feels about their gender come from their hearts and their minds (not their pants!)*
- *Certain types of bodies are thought of as boy and certain types as girl, but that's not true for everyone.*

Support processes of reflection

- *Who we are (or who others think we are) on the outside is not always who we are on the inside; think of all the wonderful things about yourself that no one else knows about by just looking at you!!*
- *Being a boy or a girl or something else is not about what you like, or what you wear, or your body. It is something that each of us figures out for ourselves, based on how we feel inside.*

Teach empathy and respect

- *How do you think you would feel if people were always asking you about your own gender?*
- *No one likes to be pointed out by other kids. Does it feel good when you think someone is talking about you?*
- *Have you ever been teased? How does it feel when you are teased or treated as an outsider?*

Normalize gender diversity

- *History is full of examples of gender diversity!*
- *There have been gender diverse people in every culture, every religion, all over the world and throughout time.*

Instructional entry points are specific ways in which teaching and learning are used to instill greater awareness and understanding about gender. Whether standing alone or integrated into other aspects of instruction, instructional approaches are the most direct way to impact students. In some ways, instructional approaches are the most easily accomplished. Teachers in their classrooms have a great deal of autonomy for what takes place there. Yet at the same time, in an era of increasingly scripted curriculum, or environments in which controversial subjects are highly scrutinized and regulated, instructional methods for creating gender inclusion can have the highest stakes for a teacher or other educator. Instructional approaches include:

- Designing lesson plans to expand understandings of gender diversity, such as those in *The Gender Inclusive School*
- Exploring current curriculum areas for natural entry points for inserting gender diversity issues or topics
- Using literature that has themes raising gender diversity issues
- Utilizing the arts to explore gender
- Using advisory programs or classroom meetings to surface gender-related themes
- Assigning open-ended projects that include gender-related topics, readings or news
- Arranging for transgender or other gender nonconforming individuals to present or work in classrooms
- Inviting guest speakers who work for greater gender equity in education, law, or other fields
- Using of video or other media that present specific ideas about gender
- Creating space for students to articulate their own understandings and beliefs about gender
- Integrating gender into curriculum areas through story problems, writing prompts, readings, art assignments, or research project

gender spectrum

Gender Inclusiveness Assessment

Use the following scale to help you get started with assessing the level of gender inclusiveness on your campus and in your classroom(s).

1 = Strongly Disagree
2 = Disagree
3 = Agree
4 = Strongly Agree
DK = Don't Know
NA = Not applicable

FOCUS AREA	1	2	3	4	DK	NA
Our school **district/board** has a posted safety policy that explicitly names gender identity and gender expression as protected classes						
Our school **district/board** has clear guidelines, administrative regulations or other directives for working with/supporting gender diverse students						
Our **school** or **district's** Student Information System allows for students to use a gender marker and name different from that on their birth certificate						
Our school has a posted safety policy that explicitly names gender identity and gender expression as protected classes						
Our school has participated in staff training explicitly focused on gender expression and gender identity, and gender inclusive practices						
Our school has conducted parent training explicitly focused on gender expression and gender identity						
Our school has conducted student training explicitly focused on gender expression and gender identity						
Our school has forms or other ways that allow for a parent to note if their child is gender nonconforming or transgender						
Our school has designated one or more individuals who are responsible for questions or concerns about gender inclusiveness on campus						
Our school provides at least one gender neutral restroom that is available to all students but required of none						
Our school makes available resources for students and families about gender diverse youth						
Our school's dress code is supportive of students dressing in a manner consistent with their own sense of gender						
Our school has a Gay Straight Alliance or other group that includes a focus on the needs of transgender or gender nonconforming students						
Our classrooms have posters, signs, door hangers or other visual cues recognizing gender diversity						
Our classrooms have posters or pictures of individuals and cultures that present non-binary or non-traditional images of gender						
Our school does not conduct activities that are segregated by gender						
Our classroom activities do not segregate students by gender						
I can point to specific assignments in my classroom designed to examine gender expression and identity						

FOCUS AREA	1	2	3	4	DK	NA
I have had guest speakers that present or speak about gender diversity						
I consciously use particular terms and phrases designed to present a non-binary model of gender						
I have shown videos or other images to students that present a non-binary model of gender						
I can identify specific instances where I have interrupted a behavior that I considered to be gender insensitive						
I am aware of resources that I can provide to families who express the need to better understand their child's gender						
I am comfortable articulating to parents/caregivers the reasons for conducting gender inclusiveness training with students						
I feel comfortable discussing the complexity of gender as it relates to my students and my work						
I feel that I have done my own internal work exploring gender, both my own as well as others'						
At our school it is safe for students to express gender in ways that are not consistent with stereotypically male or female expectations						
At our school it is safe for transgender or gender diverse students to be themselves						

Are there any patterns that you observe in your assessment? _____

_____

_____

_____

_____

How consistent are your answers with your colleagues'?_____

_____

_____

_____

Based on what you see in the assessment, where do you think <u>your school</u> needs to focus in its work to create more gender inclusive conditions? _____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

Based on what you see in the assessment, where do you think <u>you</u> need to focus in your own work to create a gender inclusive school/classroom? _____

_____

_____

_____

_____

Creating Gender Inclusive Schools

Action Planning Tool

1. What are some potential on-campus assets—programs, processes, personnel or other resources—already in place for creating greater gender inclusiveness?

2. How will you ensure that all school staff members are properly trained to understand gender issues and policies and their responsibilities in the creation of a Gender Inclusive school environment? Specify:

    A. When training will occur?

    B. Who will conduct the training?

    C. What resources will you require?

    D. What challenges do you anticipate?

3. How do you anticipate informing **students** about their rights, and articulating expectations and policies about treatment of peers in regards to Gender Expression/Identity?

4. How will your school go about supporting them to meet those expectations?

5. How has your site handled issues of specific Gender Expression/Identity Harassment in the past, including:
    a. Distribution and explanation of policies about discrimination and harassment:

    b. Implementation of Uniform Complaint Procedures in response to Gender Expression/Identity Harassment

    c. Documentation of complaints due to Gender Expression/Identity Harassment

    d. Identification and training of a Gender Inclusion Coordinator explicitly charged to handle Gender Expression/Identity issues and concerns, including harassment

    e. Professional Development for all staff about Gender Expression/Identity Harassment and their resultant responsibilities

Use the chart below to indicate how your site will work to incorporate elements of a Gender Inclusive School,

Focus Area	Individual(s) Responsible?	When?	Resources Required?	NOTES: Ideas/Questions/Concerns/ Issues/Other Considerations?
PD & Training: Understanding Gender All Staff				
PD & Training: Gender Inclusive Curriculum and Instructional Practice				
Gender Inclusive Resources: Signs, articles, AV/media, literature, images				
Privacy: Site-based documents and Student Record Systems				
Privacy: Routine contacts with parent(s)/guardian(s)				
Privacy: Protection in conversations among staff and students				
Respecting requests about Names/Pronouns				
Review of Gender Segregated Activities				
Restrooms: Gender-neutral Facility available to **all**				
Locker Room Accommodations				
Physical Education				
Intramural Sports				
Interscholastic Sports				
Gender Sensitive Dress Codes				

Focus Area	Individual(s) Responsible?	When?	Resources Required?	NOTES: Actions/Ideas/Questions/Concerns/ Issues/Other Considerations?
Policy Articulation and Distribution: postings, handbooks				
Policy Articulation and Distribution: parents, staff, students				
Complaint Procedures: Articulation				
Complaint Procedures: Implementation				
Documentation of Complaints of GE/GI Harassment				
Identify Gender Inclusion Coordinator				
Gender Inclusion Coordinator Training				
Parent & Caregiver Training				
Student Training				
Gender Inclusive School Culture Development				
Data Collection RE: Gender Inclusiveness				

gender spectrum

My Gender Journey

As professionals working with families and their children, there is a unique and influential role to be played in helping create the conditions where children can be safe in authentically expressing and identifying their gender. By embracing the richness of the gender spectrum, teachers, counselors, therapists and other adults working with kids can help to broaden their own as well as children's understandings of gender, and in so doing, help every child feel seen and recognized. An important part of that work is to consider one's own experiences, messages, and beliefs about gender, both growing up as well as in your professional role.

Spend a few minutes looking over and answering the following questions. Write your answers down, and hang on to them. You may find it interesting to revisit your reflections at some point in the future, after you have had a chance to learn more about gender through training and your own efforts. Know that there are no "right" answers; each of us comes by our own understandings of gender in a context. Messages and traditions associated with gender are complex reflections of society, family, culture, community and other socializing forces. Use this opportunity to pause, and examine your own gender history.

The exercise is divided into two parts: the first asks you to think about your own personal experiences with gender, while the second looks at your professional experiences.

My Personal Gender Journey

Today's Date:

1. Growing up, did you think of yourself as a boy, a girl, both, neither or in some other way? How did you come to that recognition? When?

2. What messages did you receive from those around you about gender? Did those messages make sense to you?

3. What's your first memory of gender defining or impacting your life?

4. How were students who did not fit into expectations about gender treated in school by other students? By the adults around them? By you?

5. Have you ever been confused by someone's gender? How did that feel for you? Why do you think you felt the way you did?

6. Has anyone ever been confused by your gender, possibly referring to you in a manner not consistent with your own sense of gender? How did that feel for you? Why do you think you felt the way you did?

7. Is there anyone in your immediate circle (family, close friends, colleagues) who is transgender or otherwise gender diverse? How would you characterize your comfort level about their gender?

8. If you were to describe your gender without talking about how you look or what you do, what would you share?

My Professional Gender Journey **Today's Date:**

1. How have issues of gender and gender diversity "shown up" in your work with families and youth?

2. Is there a child with whom you have worked that was/is transgender or in some other way gender diverse? What was your level of comfort in the situation?

3. What training have you received about gender, gender diversity, and/or gender inclusive practices?

4. How would you characterize your school or organization's overall level of acceptance for children or youth whose gender is seen as different by those around them?

5. What is your own comfort level with discussing issues of gender diversity with:
   Colleagues?_____
   Parents? _____
   Children/Youth?_____

6. Based on your personal and your professional journeys, how do you believe that your own previous experiences with gender influence the work you do? Are there ways in which those experiences enhance your ability to create greater gender inclusiveness? Are there ways in which those experiences inhibit your ability to do so? How so?

7. Do you have any final reflections about documenting your gender journey? Are there any goals you wish to set for yourself, personally? Professionally?

gender spectrum

12 easy steps on the way to gender inclusiveness…

1. Avoid asking kids to line up as boys or girls or separating them by gender. Instead, use things like *"odd and even birth date,"* or *"Which would you choose: skateboards or bikes/milk or juice/dogs or cats/summer or winter/talking or listening."* Invite students to come up with choices themselves. Consider using tools like the "appointment schedule" to form pairs or groups. Always ask yourself, "Will this configuration create a gendered space?"
2. Don't use phrases such as *"boys & girls," "you guys," "ladies and gentlemen,"* and similarly gendered expressions to get kids' attention. Instead say things like *"calling all readers,"* or *"hey campers"* or *"could all of the athletes come here."* Create classroom names and then ask all of the "purple penguins" to meet at the rug.
3. Provide an opportunity for every student to identify a preferred name or pronoun. At the beginning of the year or at Back-to-School Night, invite students and parents to let you know if they have a preferred name and/or pronoun by which they wish to be referred.
4. Have visual images reinforcing gender inclusion: pictures of people who don't fit gender norms, signs that "strike out" sayings like "All Boys…" or "All Girls…" or "All Genders Welcome" door hangers.
5. When you find it necessary to reference gender, say *"Boy, girl, both or neither."* When asked why, use this as a teachable moment. Emphasize to students that your classroom recognizes and celebrates the gender diversity of all students.
6. Point out and inquire when you hear others referencing gender in a binary manner. Ask things like, *"Hmmm. That is interesting. Can you say more about that?"* or *"What makes you say that? I think of it a little differently."* Provide counter-narratives that challenge students to think more expansively about their notions of gender.
7. Look for examples in the media that reinforce gender stereotypes or binary models of gender (it won't be hard; they're everywhere!). When with others, call it out and interrogate it.
8. Be intolerant of openly hostile attitudes or references towards others EVERY TIME you hear or observe them, but also use these as teachable moments. Take the opportunity to push the individual on their statements about gender. Being punitive may stop the behavior, at least in your presence. Being instructive may stop it entirely.
9. Teach children specific language that empowers them to be proud of who they are, or to defend others who are being mistreated. *"Please respect my privacy." "You may think that, but I don't." "You may not like it, but I do." "Hey, they're called 'private parts' for a reason."*
10. Help students recognize "all or nothing" language by helping them understand the difference between patterns and rules. Teach them phrases like "*That may be true for some people, but not all people,*" or *"frequently, but not always,"* or *"more common and less common."* Avoid using "normal" to define any behaviors.
11. Share personal anecdotes from your own life that reflect gender inclusiveness. Even better, share examples when you were not gender inclusive in your thinking, words or behaviors, what you learned as a result, and what you will do differently next time.
12. Do the work yourself. What are your own experiences with gender? What might be some of your own biases? What assumptions do you make about the gender of others? Share reflections about your own evolving understandings about gender.

gender spectrum

Responding to Children Using Gender Inclusive Language

- There are lots of ways to be boys and girls. Isn't it great?!?!
- There are lots of different types of clothes for girls **and** boys. Kids get to wear what feels comfortable to them makes them feel good.
- Toys are toys, hair is hair, colors are colors, and clothes are clothes
- Who decided what things are for boys and what things are for girls?
- Is there only one way to be a boy or girl? Can boys and girls like the same things? Do all boys like the same things? All girls?
- No one gets to tell another person how to feel on the inside.
- Sometimes this stuff is confusing. We get messages about some things being for boys and some things being for girls. But these messages are just some people's ideas. They may not be right for you. Each of us gets to decide what we like and don't like. We just can't be unkind to others about the things they like.
- Kids can do or be or like or want anything because they are individuals with hopes and likes and dreams. This is not **because** they are boys or girls. It is because they are people.
- Gender is a lot more than our bodies. It is about how we show other people things about our gender (maybe our clothes, or our hair, or the toys we like) and how we feel on the inside.
- Who you are is not about what others tell you, but something you determine for yourself (even when you get messages that say otherwise).
- Certain types of bodies are thought of as boy and certain types as girl, but that's not true for everyone.
- Who we are (or who others think we are) on the outside is not always who we are on the inside; think of all the wonderful things about yourself that no one else knows about by just looking at you!!
- Someone's feelings about their gender come from their hearts and their minds.
- Being a boy or a girl or something else is not about what you like, or what you wear, or your body. It is something that each of us figures out for ourselves.
- Gender expression is about the things we like or make us comfortable. There may be some patterns we notice, but these are not rules. More girls might wear dresses than boys, but does that mean all girls wear dresses? Or that boys can't wear dresses?
- Kids can be boys, girls, both, or neither.
- History is full of examples of gender diversity!
- There have been gender diverse people in every culture, every religion, all over the world and throughout time.
- Have you ever been teased? How does it feel when you are teased or treated as an outsider?
- No one likes to be pointed out by other kids. Does it feel good when you think someone is talking about you?
- How do you think you would feel if people were always asking you about your own gender?

gender spectrum

Discussing Gender with Kids:
Common Questions and Concerns

1. ***Why should my child learn about gender at school?***
   School is a place where children are taught to respect one another and to learn to work together regardless of their differences. Learning about gender diversity is part of that work. Creating a more tolerant, inclusive, and accepting school environment teaches all children to recognize and resist stereotypes. We teach children to stand up for others, to resist bullying, and to work together.

   We also know that many children whose gender is seen as different than what is expected of them can face very difficult circumstances. Too often teasing, bullying and violence are a common experience for a gender diverse child. A growing number of school districts and states (15 as of summer 2012) specifically prohibit bullying and harassment of students based on gender identity. Further, various federal-, state- and municipal-protections further protect these rights. In most cases, these protections call for proactive education and training to help students understand gender diversity more fully.

2. ***Isn't my child too young to be learning about gender?***
   Children are already learning about it. Messages about gender are everywhere, and children receive very clear messages about the "rules" for boys and girls, as well as the consequences for violating them. By learning about the diversity of gender, children have an opportunity to explore a greater range of interests, ideas and activities. For all children, the pressure of "doing gender correctly," is greatly reduced, creating more space for them to discover new talents and interests.

   Whether in or out of school, children will encounter other children exhibiting wide ranges of gender expression. This is normal and, with a little reflection, we can all recognize it as something we encountered during our own childhoods. Tomboys or shy, sensitive boys are commonly recognized examples of children who buck societal expectations of gender expression. These children, and all children, deserve a safe, supportive learning environment in which they can thrive and empower themselves.

3. ***If you are talking about gender, aren't you discussing reproduction and sexuality?***
   The simple answer is no. When we discuss gender, we talk about what people like to wear, the activities they engage in, and how they feel about themselves. This is not sexuality. Sexuality involves physical intimacy and attraction. Gender is about self-identity. Gender identity is a person's internal sense of where they fit on the gender spectrum. This includes all kids, "typically" gendered or not.

   If responding to questions that arise about physical sex, the discussion uses phrases such as "private parts," and even if anatomical terms come up, nothing specific to human reproduction or sexuality is taught. For the most part, children are simply not raising these questions. While as adults, we struggle to separate the ideas of gender and sexuality (primarily because we were taught that they are one and the same), children have an ability to grasp the complexity of gender diversity because sexuality does not factor in to complicate their understanding.

4. ***Ideas about gender diversity go against the values we are instilling in my child at home. Are you trying to teach my child to reject these values?***
   Absolutely not. Our children encounter people with different beliefs when they join any community. While one aim for learning about diversity is to become more accepting of those around us, not everyone is going to be best friends. That does not mean however, that they can't get along and learn together. The purpose of learning about gender diversity is to demonstrate that children are unique and that there is no single way to be a boy or a girl. If a child does not agree with or understand another student's gender identity or expression, they do not have to change how they feel inside about it. However, they also do not get to make fun, harass or harm someone either. Gender diversity education is about teaching students to live and work with others; it comes down to the simple agreement that all children must be treated with kindness and respect.

5. ***Won't my child get confused if we speak about more than two gender options?***
   Studies show that, with enough information, children of any age are able to understand that there are more than the two gender categories currently recognized by our society. When it is explained to them in a simple, age appropriate manner, gender diversity is an easy concept for children to grasp.

   When you discuss gender with your child, you may hear them exploring where they fit on the gender spectrum and why. This shows that they understand that everyone may have some variation of gender expression that fits outside of stereotypical norms. Their use of language or their personal placements along this spectrum may surprise you. We encourage all parents to approach these discussions with an air of openness and inquiry.

6. ***Don't gender diverse kids have lots of problems? Is gender non-conformity a product of abuse, emotional problems, neglect, divorce, detached, or over-involved parents?***
   No. While it is true that some transgender and gender nonconforming people do experience a tremendous amount of societal abuse and parental rejection, this is not the **cause** of their gender identity or expression. As a result, when not supported, children whose gender expression or identity is considered "atypical" often suffer from loneliness, lower self-esteem, and other negative feelings. Statistics reveal the devastating impact these young people face when placed into a non-supportive or hostile setting.

   A gender diverse child's emotional distress is a **response** to the mistreatment they have likely faced from those around them. It is not at all uncommon to see a gender diverse or transgender child's distress greatly reduce or disappear when provided with a more positive environment.

7. ***Won't allowing children to express non-traditional genders cause them to be teased or harassed?***
   While there is a great deal of data suggesting that gender diverse young people do face teasing, there is a growing body of knowledge that points to the impact gender diverse education can have on reducing that treatment. If children are being treated badly because of who they are, the **answer is not** to try and prevent them from being themselves. Rather, we should instead ask whether it is worth expanding students' understanding about stereotypes and limitations of self-expression to prevent possible teasing.

8. ***Won't discussing gender encourage my child to be transgender?***
   Being transgender is not something that a person chooses. Studies show that although parents cannot make their child gay or transgender, they can deeply influence how their children feel about themselves. Parental pressure to enforce gender conformity can damage a child's self esteem and is a high predictor of risk for youth suicide. Transgender youth currently have an extremely high attempted suicide rate: some estimate it being as high as 50%. Discussing gender **will** have the effect of removing much of the pressure students face to fit into narrowly defined expectations that few if any can actually meet.

9. ***If transgender people are so 'normal', why are some families so private about it?***
   A family with a transgender child will decide together how much they wish to share with others. Many children prefer to live their lives as the gender that reflects their internal gender identity and not adhere to what society expects based on their anatomy. In other words, a child who lets her parents know that she is a girl (even though she has 'male,' on her birth certificate) may choose to live her life as a female.

   Some children and families are open and share this with everyone in their lives. Others choose to maintain a sense of complete privacy, while still others find a blend of these two approaches. In most families, this decision will be determined jointly by the child and guardian(s), often in collaboration with a medical, mental health, or other professional experienced in this area. If a family honors their child's wish for privacy, this can have the appearance of secrecy. In reality, it may be an effort to avoid potential stigmatization.

10. ***How can I correct or modify the impression I have already given my child about gender?***
    It is powerful to share with children when we don't know the answer to something, and to let them know that adults as well as children are always learning. Having conversations with your children that reflect your growing understanding is wonderful. It does not undermine your parenting. If you were to discover that you had unknowingly taught your child another form of misinformation about other people, you would correct the impression you had mistakenly given them. With gender it is no different. Gender diversity is something that both society and science are just beginning to explore and understand.

11. ***I don't really feel like I know how to answer my child's questions.***
    Once again, explain that you are learning about this, too. It is important, however, to monitor and understand your own feelings before you initiate this kind of conversation. Children can pick up on your feelings towards a subject. So, if you are still feeling uncomfortable about the concept of gender diversity, then consider taking additional time to increase your understanding. Read, talk to others, and further educate yourself. When you have a greater understanding and increased awareness, then you will likely feel more confident to talk with your children.

    Answer children's questions simply, and let them take the lead in how deep the conversation goes. Most children are satisfied with this approach. They will guide the conversation from there and rarely ask the complex questions that occur to adults. You may be surprised at how simply children navigate this terrain. Some parents have found responses such as, "Hmmm, I am just learning about that myself. Let me tell you what I know, and then if you would like to learn more, maybe we could do that together," to be helpful in opening up pathways for further discussion.

Understanding Gender

What is Gender?

For many people, the terms "gender" and "sex" are used interchangeably, and thus incorrectly. This idea has become so common, particularly in western societies, that it is rarely questioned. We are born, assigned a sex, and sent out into the world. For many people, this is cause for little, if any dissonance. Yet biological sex and gender are different; gender is not inherently nor solely connected to one's physical anatomy.

Biological Gender (sex) includes physical attributes such as external genitalia, sex chromosomes, gonads, sex hormones, and internal reproductive structures. At birth, it is used to **assign sex**, that is, to identify individuals as male or female. *Gender* on the other hand is far more complicated. It is the complex interrelationship between an individual's **sex** (gender biology), **one's internal sense** of self as male, female, both or neither (gender identity) as well as one's **outward presentations** and behaviors (gender expression) related to that perception. Together, the intersection of these three dimensions produces one's authentic sense of gender, both in how people experience their own gender as well as how others perceive it.

The Gender Spectrum

Western culture has come to view gender as a **binary** concept, with two rigidly fixed options: male or female, both grounded in a person's physical anatomy. When a child is born, a quick glance between the legs determines the gender label that the child will carry for life. But even if gender is to be restricted to basic biology, a binary concept still fails to capture the rich variation that exists. Rather than just two distinct boxes, biological gender occurs across a continuum of possibilities. This **spectrum** of anatomical variations by itself should be enough to disregard the simplistic notions of a binary gender system.

But beyond anatomy, there are multiple domains defining gender. In turn, these domains can be independently characterized across a range of possibilities. Instead of the static, binary model produced through a solely physical understanding of gender, a far richer tapestry of biology, gender expression, and gender identity intersect in a multidimensional array of possibilities. Quite simply, the **gender spectrum** represents a more nuanced, and ultimately truly authentic model of human gender.

Falling Into Line

Gender is all around us. Like water surrounding creatures in the sea, we are often unaware of its ever-present nature. Gender is actually taught to us from the moment we are born. Gender expectations and messages bombard us constantly. Upbringing, culture, peers, schools, community, media, and religion are some of the many influences that shape our understanding of this core aspect of self. How you learned and interacted with gender as a young child directly influences how you view the world today. Gendered interactions between parent and child begin as soon as the sex of the baby is known. In short, many aspects of gender are socially constructed, particularly with regard to gender expression.

Like other social constructs, gender is closely monitored and reinforced by society. Practically everything in society is assigned a gender—toys, colors, clothes and behaviors are just some of the more obvious examples. Through a combination of social conditioning and personal preference, by age three most children prefer activities and exhibit behaviors typically associated with their sex. Accepted social gender roles and expectations are so entrenched in our culture that most people cannot imagine any other way. As a result, individuals fitting neatly into these expectations rarely if ever question what *gender* really means. They have never had to, because the system has worked for them.

About Gender Expansiveness

"**Gender expansive**" is an umbrella term used for individuals that broaden commonly held definitions of gender, including its expression, associated identities, and/or other perceived gender norms, in one or more aspects of their life. These individuals expand the definition of gender through their own identity and/or expression. Some individuals do not identify with being either male or female; others identify as a blend of both, while still others identify with a gender, but express their gender in ways that differ from stereotypical presentations. A gender expansive person's preferences and self-expression may fall outside commonly understood gender norms within their own culture; or they may be aligned with them even as one's internal gender identity doesn't align with the sex assigned at birth.

This diversity of gender is a normal part of the human experience, across cultures and throughout history. Non-binary gender diversity exists all over the world, documented by countless historians and anthropologists. Examples of individuals living comfortably outside of typical male/female expectations and/or identities are found in every region of the globe. The *calabai*, and *calalai* of Indonesia, two-spirit Native Americans, and the *hijra* of India all represent more complex understandings of gender than allowed for by a simplistic binary model.

Further, what might be considered gender expansive in one period of history may become gender normative in another. One need only examine trends related to men wearing earrings or women sporting tattoos to quickly see the malleability of social expectations about gender. Even the seemingly intractable "pink is for girls, blue is for boys" notions are relatively new. While there is some debate about the reasons why they reversed, what is well documented is that not until the mid-twentieth century were notions of pink for girls or blue for boys so firmly ensconced. You can make the case that "pink is the new blue!"

Gender And Privilege

When someone is "typically gendered," they benefit from gender privilege. For individuals whose biological sex, gender expression, and gender identity neatly align, often referred to as "cisgender," there is a level of congruence as they encounter the world around them. Like many forms of social privilege, this is frequently an unexamined aspect of their lives. Forms they fill out, the clothing stores in which they shop, or identification papers they carry bring few if any second thoughts. Yet for a transgender or otherwise gender expansive person, each of these, and many more examples, is a constant reminder that they move about in a culture that really does not account for their own experience. Social privilege comes from an assumption that one's own perspective is universal; whether related to race, or language, or gender, privilege comes from being part of the "norm." Or, as Dorothy Soelle aptly described it: *Privilege is being able to choose what you will not see.*

To understand this more intuitively, think about the last time you were in a public setting and needed to use a restroom. For cisgender individuals, this rarely presents a problem or question (issues of cleanliness notwithstanding!). Yet for an individual who does not fit into narrowly defined expectations of gender presentation or identity, restroom use can present a whole host of challenges, sometimes even becoming a matter of life and death. The daily need to make judgments about what one does, or wears, or says based on other people's perceptions of their gender is a burden that many people never encounter. These everyday reminders of being different are also constant reinforcement of being "other."

Conclusion

Perhaps the most fundamental aspect of a person's identity, gender deeply influences every part of one's life. In a society where this crucial aspect of self has been so narrowly defined and rigidly enforced, individuals who exists outside its norms face innumerable challenges. Even those who vary only slightly from the norm can become targets of disapproval. Yet this does not have to be the case forever. Through a thoughtful consideration of the uniqueness and validity of every person's experiences of self, we can develop greater acceptance for all. Not only will this create greater inclusion for individuals who challenge the norms of gender, it will actually create space for all individuals to more fully explore and celebrate who they are.

What is Gender?

Gender is made up of three parts:

1. our bodies (***gender biology***)
2. how we dress and act (***gender expression***), and
3. how we feel inside (***gender identity***).

Gender Biology

- When a baby is born, they are assigned a sex based on their bodies (usually based on their private parts). This called your ***assigned sex***. This is what goes on your birth certificate. Many people think that someone's *assigned sex* and *gender* are always the same. Sometimes they are the same, but not all the time!
- For most people, it is very clear what kind of body someone has, but sometimes it is not quite as clear. Some people are born with bodies that have different combinations inside or outside. The term for this is "intersex," which means "between the sexes." Being intersex is not common, but it is a natural form of variation; it shows us that people come in lots of shapes and sizes! There are not just "boy bodies" or "girl bodies."

Gender Expression

- ***Gender expression*** is the way we show our gender to the world. It can also be how the world thinks we should act because of our gender (like boys shouldn't cry or girls are always soft and gentle).
- When you walk into a room, you often look at what people are wearing, at their hair, or at other things about them to decide who is a boy or who is a girl. In our culture, certain clothes and hairstyles are more common for one gender or the other. What is important to remember is that being more common does not make it "the only way" or "the right way."
- While it may be more common for girls to wear or like or do some things, it is not because they are girls. These are just things they like. If a girl does or likes or wears something that boys more commonly do or like or wear, does that make the girl suddenly a boy? Of course not! The same is true for boys who do things that girls more commonly do or like or wear. In fact, there are no "boy" things or "girl" things: toys are toys, hair is hair, colors are colors, and clothes are clothes.
- The way we show our gender is all about what makes us feel comfortable and good. These can often change, and can be different from culture to culture.

Gender Identity

- Another part of our gender is the way we feel on the inside, in our hearts and minds. This is called ***gender identity***.
- Most people have a gender identity that is the same as what the doctors said you were in the hospital (your *assigned sex*).
- Sometimes, people feel differently on the inside than their assigned sex. While everyone around them thinks and says they are one thing, they feel like something else. Perhaps they feel a little bit like a boy AND a girl. Maybe they feel like a boy even though everyone else thinks they are a girl. People can be boys, girls, both, neither or feel differently at different times.
- How people feel on the inside about their gender is very personal. Some people like to share how they feel, but others don't. It's best not to talk or ask about someone's gender unless they bring it up themselves. No one likes to be pointed out by other people. Does it feel good when you think someone is talking about you? How do you think you would feel if people were always asking you about your own gender?
- Your gender is not about what others tell you, but something you determine for yourself. No one gets to tell another person how they feel on the inside.

How These Three Parts of Gender Fit Together

- For many people these three parts "line up," that is, their body, how they present gender, and how they feel all are the same.
- Sometimes people may have one kind of body, but like lots of different things. But they still feel like the sex they were assigned when they were born. In our culture, an example of this might be girl who likes sports and trucks or a boy who likes pink and dolls.
- Sometimes, someone might be assigned one sex when they are born, but feel on the inside that they are the other gender. The term that is sometimes used for this is ***transgender*.**
- Of course, pretty much any combination is possible. This is all very complex and it is a lot more interesting to have so much variety! It can really be confusing because we are taught that there are only two possibilities—boy or girl. In fact, the possibilities are endless.

Gender is Different than Sexual Orientation

- A lot of people confuse gender and sexual orientation, but they are different.
- Sexual orientation is about who you are attracted to (i.e. whether you are heterosexual, gay, lesbian, bisexual, etc.)
- Gender is about who you ***are***.

So Don't Forget…

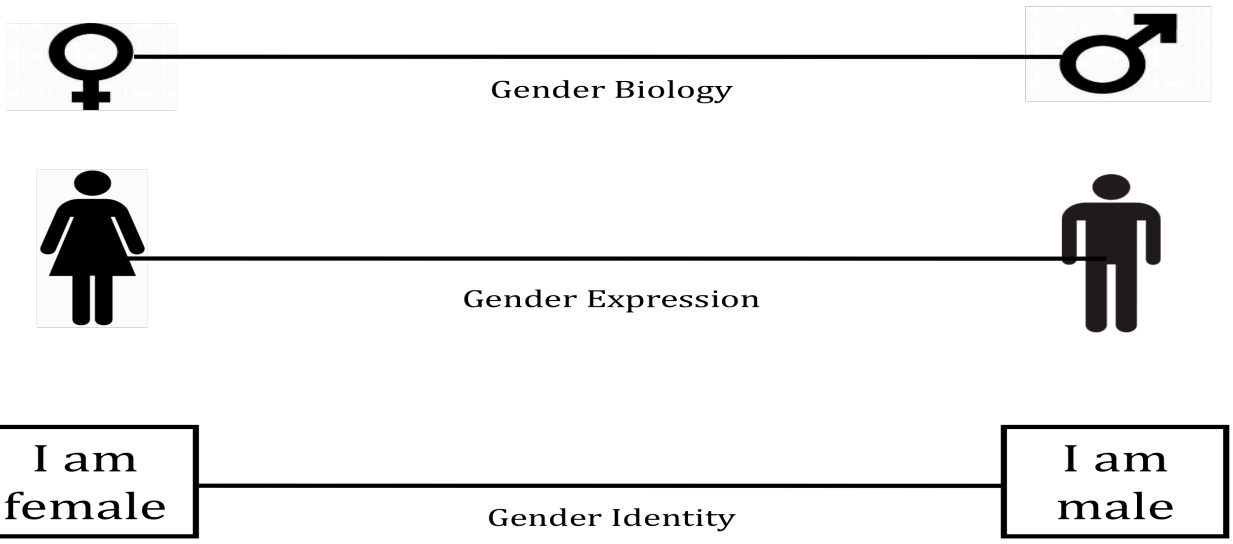
- Gender is about a lot more than just our bodies. It also includes the way we express ourselves and how we feel in our hearts and our minds.
- There are lots of different genders.
- Gender and Sexual orientation are different.

No one can tell another person how to feel on the inside. Each of us decides for ourselves. No matter what messages you get from other people around you, you know who you are, or are the person who gets to figure it out!

gender spectrum

Mapping My Gender

Use the lines below to map your own gender. Then answer the questions on the back. You can fold your paper in half if you wish to keep your profile private.



gender spectrum

Mapping My Gender

1. Was mapping your own gender difficult or easy? What made it so?

2. What are some ways that this model helps us to understand gender better?

3. What are some of the ways that this model is still not enough to really understand gender?

4. Has your gender profile changed over time? In what ways?

5. What is your comfort level with your own gender? What about the gender of others?

6. What does the "Gender Spectrum" mean to you?

gender spectrum

The Language of Gender

The power of language to shape our perceptions of other people is immense. Precise use of terms in regards to gender can have a significant impact on demystifying many of the misperceptions associated with gender. However, the vocabulary of gender continues to evolve and there is not universal agreement about the definitions of many terms. Nonetheless, here is some working language and examples of frequently used (and misused) terms. We offer them as a starting place for dialogue and understanding, which begins with a shared understanding of **how** a particular term is being used, rather than an assertion that they represent the final or only final definition of the various terms.

Biological/Anatomical Sex. The physical structure of one's genitalia used to assign sex at birth. In addition to these, biological sex includes chromosomes, hormones and internal organs and other structures related to reproduction. Given the potential variation in all of these, biological sex must be seen as a spectrum or range of possibilities rather than a binary set of only two options (see "Intersex").

Gender Identity. One's innermost core concept of self which can include male, female, a blend of both or neither, and many more—how individuals perceive themselves and what they call themselves. One's gender identity can be the same or different than the sex assigned at birth. Individuals become conscious of this between the ages 18 months and 3 years. Most people develop a gender identity that matches their biological sex. For some, however, their gender identity is different from their biological or assigned sex. Some of these individuals choose to socially, hormonally and/or surgically change their physical appearance to more fully match their gender identity and some do not.

Gender Expression. Refers to the ways in which people externally communicate their gender identity to others through behavior, clothing, hairstyle, voice, and other forms of presentation. Gender expression also works the other way as people assign gender to others based on their appearance, mannerisms, and other artificially gendered characteristics. When referred to as a "culturally constructed concept," gender expression in most often the dimension being described. Gender expression should not be viewed as an indication of sexual orientation.

Gender Role. This is the set of roles, activities, expectations and behaviors commonly associated with females and males by society. Our culture recognizes two basic gender roles: Masculine (having the qualities typically attributed to males) and feminine (having the qualities typically attributed to females). There are societies throughout the world that have more nuanced notions about gender roles, with three or more designations.

Transgender. Sometimes used as an umbrella term to describe anyone whose identity or behavior falls outside of stereotypical gender norms. More narrowly defined, it refers to an individual whose gender identity does not match their assigned birth sex. Being transgender does not imply any specific sexual orientation (attraction to people of a specific sex and/or gender.) Therefore, transgender people may additionally identify as straight, gay, lesbian, bisexual, pansexual, etc.

Sexual Orientation. Term that refers to being physically, romantically or sexually attracted to people of a specific gender and/or sex. Our sexual orientation and our gender identity are separate, distinct parts of our overall identity. Although a child may not yet be aware of their sexual orientation, they usually have a strong sense of their gender identity.

Genderqueer. This term represents a blurring of the lines around gender and sexual orientation. Genderqueer individuals typically reject notions of static categories of gender and embrace a fluidity of

gender identity and sexual orientation. This term is typically used as an identifier for teens or adults and not used in reference to pre-adolescent children.

Cisgender/Gender Normative. Refers to people whose sex assignment at birth corresponds to their gender identity, and often their expression (*cis*- from Latin meaning "on the same side [as]" or "on this side [of]." In contrast to *trans*- from the Latin root meaning "across", "beyond" or "on the opposite side").

Gender-expansive. An umbrella term used for individuals that broaden their own culture's commonly held definitions of gender, including expectations for its expression, identities, roles, and/or other perceived gender norms. Gender-expansive individuals include those who identify as transgender, as well as anyone else whose gender in some way is seen to be stretching the surrounding society's notions of gender.

Cross Gender. Sometimes used to describe children who have adopted attributes that transgress the usual socially assigned gender roles or expectations, or who do not identify as either of the two sexes as currently defined.

Gender Fluidity: Gender fluidity conveys a wider, more flexible range of gender expression or identity, with interests and behaviors that may change, even from day to day. Gender fluid children do not feel confined by restrictive boundaries of stereotypical expectations of girls or boys. In other words, a child may feel they are a girl some days and a boy on others, or a combination, or possibly feel that neither term describes them accurately.

DSD/Intersex: Disorders/Differences of Sexual Development. About 1% of children are born with chromosomes, hormones, genitalia and/or other sex characteristics that are not exclusively male or female as defined by the medical establishment in our society. In most cases, these children are at no medical risk, but most are assigned a biological sex (male or female) by their doctors and/or families.

FtM (Female to Male)/Affirmed male/transboy. A child or adult who was born anatomically female but has a male gender identity. This individual may or may not have undergone a transition of some sort.

MtF (Male to Female)/Affirmed female/transgirl. A child or adult who was born anatomically male but has a female gender identity. This individual may or may not have undergone a transition of some sort.

Gender. A socially constructed system of classification that ascribes qualities of masculinity and femininity to people. Gender expectations and norms can change over time and are different between cultures. Gender is often used synonymously, and incorrectly with sex, but this is inaccurate because sex refers to physical/biological characteristics and gender refers to social and emotional attributes.

Transition: The process by which a transgender individual strives to have physical presentation more closely align with identity. Transition can occur in three ways: *social transition* through non-permanent changes in such things as clothing, hairstyle, name and/or pronouns; *medical transition* through the use of medicines such as hormone "blockers" or cross hormones to promote gender-based body changes; and/or *surgical transition* in which an individual's body is modified through the addition or removal of gender-related physical traits.

Transsexuals. Individuals who do not identify with their birth-assigned genders and physically alter their bodies surgically and/or hormonally. This physical transition is a complicated, multi-step process that may take years and may include, but is not limited to, sex reassignment surgery.

Transphobia. Fear or hatred of transgender people; transphobia is manifested in a number of ways, including violence, harassment, and discrimination.