gender spectrum

Discussing Gender Diversity with Kids

- Be proactive in your conversations, bring up topics of gender and gender identity; ***don't*** wait for your child to bring it up or for an experience or incident to talk about.
- When you or your child refers to someone else as male or female (i.e. *"see that man over there,"* or *"I like that girl's necklace"*), ask whether you can be really sure that you know the person's gender. Introduce the idea that when we notice someone's gender, we are often making assumptions based on patterns of gender expression. Sometimes, these patterns don't hold. When they don't, use it as an opportunity to point out that the person did not do anything wrong; rather you made the error in assuming something that turned out not be true!
- Speak (in private, of course) of specific people in your child's environment who express gender differently. Explore what your child thinks about it and share ***your*** thoughts and feelings about it.
- Ask what your child thinks of as "boy" things or "girl" things, and then ask why. See if there are things they like which are assigned to the opposite gender and talk about how it would feel to be told they couldn't wear or like or do those things.
- When someone says something gender-biased (e.g. *He is all boy! Look at all the energy he has*!), take the opportunity to mention counter examples (e.g. *One of the girls he plays with has even more energy than he does*!).
- Reflect on and share with your children ways in which the expectations of others about your own gender have impacted you. Are there things you were not allowed to do because of what others thought about your gender? Things that you were expected to do because of your gender? How did these expectations affect you growing up?
- Whenever possible, point out to your children when gender assumptions are being made (just watch five minutes of Disney!) and when gender assumptions are being challenged.
- Talk to your kids about how everyone is a little different, and while people create these labels, these boxes, in which to fit people, most people don't completely belong in either box - and that is OK. Give examples of boys who like sparkly things, girls who like to play with trucks. Try to use yourself and other well-loved family members as examples (e.g. *When I was a little girl, people told me I shouldn't wear red and black even though they were my favorite colors because they weren't "girl" colors.*)
- Question and explore your own biases. For example, how do you feel about boys wearing long hair? Girls who "dress like boys?" Girls playing football or boys wearing earrings or fingernail polish? What messages about gender expression are you giving your child?
- Watch TV shows and ads and discuss: 1) How gender roles are portrayed; and 2) what messages are being sent. Is the mom always making cookies or dinner with the daughter and serving the boys? Are only boys playing with the Tonka trucks or Hot Wheels?

- Mix up gender language when reading stories to your kids – especially with typically male-dominated characters. For example, if the story is about a “boy” animal, mix it up and make the lion a girl. Consider adopting this strategy for the people in a story, too. Mixing up gender language in a story is an ally strategy because you can present gender as a fluid concept by switching up pronouns and behavior expectations. It’s also creative to not have to read a story the same way every time!
- Explore the names we use to describe other people (i.e. Tomboy, Girlie, etc.). For some, those names are very hurtful. Respectfully talk with people about other ways they might want to be described.
- Practice (by yourself or with other adults) talking about gender without bias, embarrassment, or judgment. When ready, invite your child into the discussion.
- Introduce the notion of "boy, girl, blends, both, or neither" as a regular way to talk about people.
- Don’t rely on or expect transgender people to take the lead on discussing gender identity. Be an ally to the transgender community by bringing up issues of gender and gender identity.
- Help advocate for gender-neutral bathrooms for students, parents, and staff. Note: Many public facilities have single-stall restrooms that are often gender marked; these can easily be reassigned as gender-neutral bathrooms or simply labeled “Restroom.” An extension of this ally strategy is to post a sign indicating where to find a gender-neutral restroom at a school site or other public facility.
- When introducing yourself, consider sharing your preferred gender pronouns: *“My name is Jessica and I use she/her/hers.*” Try asking the adults around you what, if any, pronoun they would like you to use. Ask politely; it is not rude, but rather respectful. Try asking that of everyone you know as a way to bring the topic up in conversation. Start with people you would feel comfortable having the conversation with. You might explain that you are working to create a more gender inclusive environment for all people. This is particularly supportive for people who are questioning their gender or in the early stages of transition.
- Dig deep, embrace the most loving and accepting attitude toward all our kids in whatever way they express their gender and encourage them to do the same. Encourage and model imagination, compassion, respect and empathy.
- Help kids understand that the only thing that is "normal" in our world is variation!

Adapted from Roosevelt Elementary School, San Leandro California *“Labels Shouldn’t Limit Us”* Parent Education Workshop, March 2010