

gender spectrum

Common Questions and Concerns About Gender and Children

Visit www.genderspectrum.org for more

Common Questions and Concerns About Gender and Children

Our aim is to welcome every parent, caregiver and family member, curious, questioning, or confident, to explore, learn, and support their child with compassion.

What this guide is not: It is not a medical protocol or legal brief.

Many parents have questions about how to best support their children as they start expressing their gender in unexpected ways. It's natural to have concerns, especially when we've had limited education about gender diversity. It can get confusing to navigate the media noise to get to what experts in the field are really saying. This guide addresses frequently asked questions and common concerns that many families share as they seek to understand and support their gender-expansive children.



Are kids too young to know their gender?

Most children develop a stable sense of their gender identity quite early. According to the American Academy of Pediatrics, by age four, most children have a stable sense of their gender identity. This understanding comes from within–it's an inherent aspect of who someone is. That self-knowledge develops from the inside out; it is not something adults "put into" a child.[6]

When gender-normative children express their gender at a young age, we typically accept it without question. Gender-expansive children deserve the same understanding and acceptance when they share who they are.

However, people discover and understand their gender identity at many different life stages. While some transgender individuals recognize their identity as soon as they understand gender categories, others may not fully understand their experience until their teens, adulthood, or even later in life. Many people initially feel "different" but don't connect this to gender until they encounter new language or find role models who reflect their experience. Common times for gender realization include:

- Early childhood
- Puberty and adolescence
- College years

Sometimes young people may initially identify as gay, lesbian, or bisexual before recognizing it's their gender identity, not their sexual orientation, they're exploring. Fear of rejection, lack of knowledge, or social stigma can also delay when someone feels safe sharing their gender identity.

Research shows a significant gap between self-understanding and disclosure: in one study, children realized their transgender or nonbinary identity at an average age of 7.9 years but didn't share this understanding until age 15.5.[7]

In a 2023 Human Rights Campaign youth survey, fewer than half of transgender and gender-expansive youth had told their parents/guardians about their gender, illustrating the gap between knowing and sharing. Exposure to language, role models, and feelings of safety all influence timing.[8]

BOTTOM LINE — Many children know their gender identity early; affirming them builds trust and well-being.



© 2025 Gender Spectrum. All rights reserved.

Will talking about gender confuse young kids?

Why early talk helps

We actually communicate with children about gender from birth through names, diaper-cakes that come in pink or blue, and the ways adults describe "strong little man" or "sweet princess." Children receive messages about how children assumed to be boys and children assumed to be girls are "supposed to" look and behave—from family, friends, faith, books, media, and advertising. Kids readily absorb these gender rules from toys, ads, peers, and adults. By preschool, kids have already soaked up hundreds of rules about who can wear sparkles, who is «supposed» to like trucks, and even by first grade, who is "really, really smart." When caring adults stay silent, children default to those stereotypes, which can limit their confidence, friendships, and future dreams.

Silence keeps these limiting gender boxes in place; conversation opens doors. Curriculum studies tell us that all children benefit when adults name a wider range of gender possibilities. Recent research shows us:

- **Age 6** — Children assumed to be girls are less likely to view their own gender as "really, really smart."[1]
- **Ages 7–8** — Large U.S. sample (40k students) shows children assumed to be boys are more associated with computer science/engineering talent.[2]
- **Confidence & career dreams** — Media coverage of the same dataset found that first-graders already linked tech talent to children assumed to be boys, nudging children assumed to be girls away from STEM play.[3]

Talking about gender helps all kids:

- Classrooms that include diverse gender stories report fewer bias-based bullying incidents and a warmer climate for every student [9].
- Age-appropriate lessons on gender boost empathy and resilience among all students, not just those who are gender-diverse [10].
- Early-childhood programs that invite gender exploration through play see more creative problem-solving and broader friendship networks [11].

Professional bodies also agree that speaking with children about these things can be valuable. The American Academy of Pediatrics' 2023 guidance urges families to provide affirming, developmentally matched information on gender, noting that early support "promotes optimal social-emotional development." [6]

Children are already "taking notes" on gender. Age-appropriate conversations—picture books about many kinds of families and many kinds of kids, using everyone's pronouns at circle-time, praising all kids for being curious and capable—don't confuse them. They expand what's possible, help every child feel seen, and chip away at stereotypes before they harden.

BOTTOM LINE — Age-appropriate talk about gender reduces confusion and fosters healthy identity growth.



Is gender just male and female?

Gender diversity basics

Gender is broader than two boxes, and that understanding is neither new nor uniquely Western. While boy/girl (or man/woman) are the most common gender identities, many people experience gender in other ways. The idea that only two genders exist is called the "gender binary."

Some people have a binary gender identity (boy or girl), regardless of their sex. Others have a nonbinary gender identity, meaning they may identify as both, neither, or as another gender entirely. Some people are agender and don't identify with any gender.

The 2023 Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System survey conducted by the CDC found that 3.3% of U.S. high school students identify as transgender—and another 2.2% reported questioning their gender identity.13

All of these identities are valid and natural parts of human diversity.

Cultures across time and geography have long embraced more than two genders:

- Hijra people in South Asia have performed spiritual and social roles for centuries and were legally recognized as a third gender by India's Supreme Court in 2014.
- Many Indigenous nations of North America use the term Two-Spirit for people who embody both masculine and feminine roles; such individuals held (and often still hold) revered ceremonial positions long before European contact.
- Among the Zapotec of Oaxaca, Muxe are viewed as a distinct, respected gender that predates Spanish colonization and exists to this day.
- In Samoa, fa'afafine (and the less-known fa'afatama) "move between male and female worlds," often caring for elders and educating youth.
- The Bugis people of Sulawesi, Indonesia, recognize five genders including bissu (priestly) and calalai/calabai identities—an arrangement traced back at least six centuries.

These examples show that multi-gender systems are Indigenous knowledge, not a recent Western concept.

Even language reminds us that the binary is not universal:

Numerous world languages lack gendered pronouns altogether—e.g., Finnish ("hän"), Turkish ("o"), Hungarian ("ő"), Mandarin ("tā" originally ungendered), Yoruba ("òun"), and many Austronesian tongues. Speakers naturally describe people without needing "he" or "she," proving that thinking beyond two genders is linguistically ordinary for millions.

Across continents and centuries, societies have recognized and valued genders outside "male" and "female." Modern and emerging language around identity and expression simply gives us new vocabulary to describe a very old human reality. Gender diversity is not political fashion—it's a recognition of the richness of global human experience.

BOTTOM LINE — Cultures worldwide recognize more than two genders; diversity is a normal human trait.

© 2025 Gender Spectrum. All rights reserved.
For more visit **www.genderspectrum.org/resources**

gender spectrum

Isn’t this just a social-media trend?

Social media realities
Parents often notice that conversations about gender diversity seem to appear first on TikTok, YouTube, or Discord and wonder whether these platforms are causing young people to identify as transgender or nonbinary. Current research and history point to a different story:

What the data say about social media and gender-diverse youth

- Social media's primary uses are for support & information, not "trend-following." A 2024 research brief from the Digital Wellness Lab[14] found that gender-diverse adolescents go online mainly to seek community, learn vocabulary, and share coping tips. Feeling safe in even one online space was linked to lower anxiety and suicide risk.
- Affirming spaces online correlate with better mental health outcomes. In the Trevor Project's 2024 national survey[4], 73% of transgender and nonbinary youth said the internet is an affirming place for them; those who reported no affirming online space had higher rates of depressive symptoms and suicide attempts.[4]
- No evidence of "social contagion." A 2022 Pediatrics analysis of CDC[5] Youth Risk Behavior Survey data found no statistical pattern consistent with the idea that peers or social media "create" transgender identities. The study showed that overall numbers of trans-identified students actually declined between 2017 and 2019 in some regions.
- Risks are real—but familiar. A 2024 German study of 165 transgender[16] youth showed that cyberbullying and misinformation do occur online, yet positive support networks predominated. The authors recommend teaching digital literacy rather than restricting access.

Why more people are "coming out" now

Greater visibility gives young people the words and examples they need to describe feelings that often predate internet use. Research shows that social media amplifies authentic self-expression rather than manufacturing identity.

Many young people report feeling "different" long before encountering gender-diverse content online. What social media provides is:

- Vocabulary to articulate existing feelings
- Role models who share similar experiences
- Community that validates their internal sense of self
- Resources for understanding and coping

A helpful historical parallel: left-handedness
Rates of Americans openly identifying as left-handed jumped from roughly 3% in 1900 to about 10% by the 1950s, once schools stopped forcing right-hand writing. Scholars agree the increase reflected reduced stigma, not newly created left-handers.

Gender diversity shows a similar pattern: as penalties ease and language spreads, more people feel safe expressing who they have always been. The internet simply provides a safer space for that expression to emerge.

Social media can expose teens to both harm and help—just as it does for sports, politics, or study tips. The best approach isn't to fear that platforms are causing new genders, but to:

- Teach your child critical-thinking skills and monitor for bullying
- Ask what your child finds helpful online and why
- Encourage offline friendships and activities alongside digital ones
- Recognize the positive in online communities and set helpful boundaries

Visibility reflects growing feelings of safety and increasing social vocabulary, not a fad. Your steady support both online and off has far more influence on your child's well-being than any algorithm.

BOTTOM LINE — Data show genuine identity, not peer contagion; online spaces mainly offer community.

Is this just a phase?

Identity persistence
This question often stems from a place of hope that a child’s distress might be temporary, but it’s important to understand what research tells us about gender identity persistence.

While some children may explore different aspects of gender expression as part of normal development, persistent, consistent, and insistent expressions of gender identity tend to remain stable over time. Mental health professionals distinguish between temporary gender exploration and a consistent gender identity.

Research shows that transgender children demonstrate the same level of certainty about their gender identity as cisgender children do about theirs. Studies following transgender children over time consistently find that the vast majority maintain their gender identity as they grow.

It’s also worth noting that even if a young person’s understanding of their gender evolves—which can happen for anyone throughout life—supporting them in their current experience is always the right approach. The alternative—dismissing or invalidating a child’s expressed identity—carries documented risks to mental health and family relationships.

The “phase” concern sometimes reflects anxiety about making irreversible decisions. However, gender-affirming care for children and adolescents follows established medical guidelines that prioritize reversible interventions appropriate to each developmental stage. Social support and acceptance remain the most important factors in a gender-expansive young person’s well-being at any age.

Rather than focusing on whether something might be “just a phase,” consider focusing on how to support your child’s well-being and authentic self-expression right now. This support benefits them regardless of how their identity may or may not evolve over time.

BOTTOM LINE — Persistent, consistent, insistent identity signals rarely fade; support prevents harm.



© 2025 Gender Spectrum. All rights reserved.

What if my child changes their mind?

Supporting flexibility
This concern comes from a place of love and wanting to protect your child. Here are some important points to consider:

Not all children who express themselves in gender-expansive ways are transgender—gender identity and gender expression are different aspects of gender. Given the limited vocabulary we often provide children about gender, it can take time for them to find language that fits their experience.

Research shows that transgender children are at least as certain about their gender identity as other children are about theirs. The longer an identity persists, especially when it's consistent and insistent, the less likely it is to change.[17]

While identity can evolve for any person throughout life (cisgender, transgender, and nonbinary alike), qualified professionals can help families and children understand individual indicators and provide appropriate support and guidance.

Most importantly, research consistently shows that affirming people in their gender identity is essential for well-being and can be lifesaving.[18]

Long-term data are reassuring: in a five-year study following socially-transitioned kids (average start age 8), 94% continued to identify as transgender, 3.5% as nonbinary, and 2.5% as cisgender. Identity can evolve, this is true for everyone, but persisting, consistent assertions are strong indicators that this is a serious identity experience. Skilled gender-literate clinicians can help families gauge a child's needs without rushing any medical steps.[19]

BOTTOM LINE — Safe, reversible steps let youth explore; supportive parenting adapts if needs evolve.



Is being trans a mental health condition?

Health facts
Being transgender or nonbinary are natural variations in human gender identity.

Identity itself is not a disorder. All people have a gender identity, it's a fundamental aspect of who we are. Some people experience gender dysphoria, which is distress that can occur when their body or social treatment doesn't match their internal sense of gender. However, this distress often stems at least in part from lack of support or societal rejection rather than from their gender identity itself.

What most harms mental health is minority stress, the harmful effects of bullying, discrimination, rejection, and stigmatization that comes from a minority identity. When these external stressors are removed or minimized, mental health outcomes improve dramatically.

When family support is strong, transgender and nonbinary youths' depression and anxiety levels mirror those of their cisgender peers. This demonstrates that gender identity itself doesn't cause mental health problems—lack of acceptance and support does.[18]

BOTTOM LINE — Being transgender isn't a disorder; stigma, not identity, drives

Can my gender-expansive child live a happy life?

Well-being outcomes
Absolutely. While transgender and nonbinary youth do face higher risks for mental health challenges when unsupported, there are clear factors that promote well-being and resilience.

The most significant factor in a gender-expansive young person's well-being is family support. Research consistently demonstrates that acceptance changes everything. The Trevor Project's 2024 national survey found that transgender and nonbinary youth whose pronouns were respected by everyone they lived with had about half the suicide-attempt rate compared to those without this support (11% vs 20%).[4]

These data illustrate a powerful truth: loving families, affirming schools, and inclusive healthcare enable transgender people to thrive. When transgender and nonbinary people have accepting families and communities, they build meaningful relationships, create families of their own, pursue fulfilling careers, and live full, joyful lives.

Your support as a parent is not just important, it can be lifesaving. The difference between a supported and unsupported gender-expansive young person is often the difference between thriving and struggling. When families embrace their children's authentic selves, those children grow up to contribute meaningfully to their communities, form loving partnerships, excel in their chosen fields, and experience the full spectrum of human joy and fulfillment.

BOTTOM LINE — With family love and inclusive spaces, transgender and nonbinary youth can thrive and succeed.

© 2025 Gender Spectrum. All rights reserved.

gender spectrum

Am I doing the right thing as a parent?

Parental impact
Supporting your child's authentic self is always the right direction. This might include:

- Listening without judgment
- Learning about gender diversity
- Connecting with supportive communities and resources
- Working with knowledgeable healthcare providers when appropriate
- Advocating for your child in various settings

Daily support looks like:

- Using your child's chosen name and pronouns consistently
- Letting them choose clothes that feel right (within your family's guidelines)
- Defending them to relatives who might be unsupportive
- Researching their school's policies on gender-inclusive practices
- Celebrating their milestones and identity just as you would any other aspect of who they are
- Making your home a safe space where they can express themselves authentically

When you're struggling:

- It's normal to grieve expectations you had—seek support for yourself too
- Focus on your child's well-being over others' opinions
- Remember that supporting doesn't mean rushing—you can affirm their identity while taking medical decisions slowly and thoughtfully
- It's okay to make mistakes as you learn; what matters is your willingness to keep trying

Remember that supporting your child is a process. It's okay to have questions, feel uncertain sometimes, or need time to process. What matters most is your commitment to loving them unconditionally and creating an environment where they can thrive as their authentic self.

BOTTOM LINE — Affirming your child's authentic self is the single most protective action a parent can take.



What if my partner and I disagree?

Finding unity
It's common for parents to process this information at different speeds or have different comfort levels. Family disagreements about gender support can feel overwhelming, but they're manageable with patience and commitment to your child's well-being.

Start with shared values. Most parents want their child to be happy, healthy, and authentic. Even when you disagree on approaches, you likely share these fundamental goals. Focus conversations on these common values rather than specific policies or practices.

Agree on immediate safety. Even while processing your own feelings, commit to not expressing rejection or dismissal to your child. A child doesn't need to witness parental disagreement about their identity while parents work through their own concerns.

Seek education together. Read resources, attend support groups, or meet with a gender-literate family therapist as a team. Learning together helps ensure you're both working from the same information base rather than different assumptions.

Key resources:

Gender Spectrum · PFLAG · Trevor Project

Use 'both/and' thinking. You can both support your child AND take time to understand. You can both affirm their identity AND move slowly on any decisions. Supporting doesn't mean rushing—it means creating safety while you learn.

Consider professional support. A gender-literate family therapist can help bridge different comfort levels and provide strategies for maintaining family unity while respecting everyone's process.

Remember: Your child benefits most when parents present a united front of love, even if you're still learning. They need to know that while you might be figuring things out, your love for them isn't in question.

BOTTOM LINE — Professional guidance and open dialogue help families align when parents disagree.

Moving Forward

Every family's journey is unique. Whether you're just beginning to learn about gender diversity or have been supporting your gender-expansive child for years, know that your love and support make an enormous difference in your child's life.

Consider connecting with other families, educational resources, and supportive professionals who can provide guidance tailored to your family's specific needs. Remember that creating a supportive environment for your child benefits not just your family but helps build a more inclusive world for all children.

© 2025 Gender Spectrum. All rights reserved.

For more visit **www.genderspectrum.org/resources**

gender spectrum

Sources

[1] Bian, L., Leslie, S.J., & Cimpian, A. (2017). Gender stereotypes about intellectual ability emerge early and influence children's interests. Science, 355(6323), 389–391.

[2] Cheryan, S., Master, A., & Meltzoff, A. (2024). By age six, children think boys are better than girls at computing and engineering. American Institutes for Research Research Brief.

[3] LA School Report. (2024). First-graders already link tech talent to boys.

[4] The Trevor Project. (2024). 2024 U.S. National Survey on the Mental Health of LGBTQ+ Young People.

[5] Turban, J.L., Beckwith, N., Reisner, S.L., & Keuroghlian, A.S. (2022). Sex Assigned at Birth Ratio Among Transgender and Gender Diverse Adolescents in the United States. Pediatrics, 150(6), e2022059680.

[6] Rafferty, J., Committee on Psychosocial Aspects of Child and Family Health. (2018). Ensuring comprehensive care and support for transgender and gender-diverse children and adolescents. Pediatrics, 142(4), e20182162.

[7] Wilczynski, C., et al. (2023). Age at Realization and Disclosure of Gender Identity Among Transgender Adults in the United States. Journal of Sexual Medicine, 20(4), 456–465.

[8] Human Rights Campaign. (2023). LGBTQ+ Youth Report.

[9] GLSEN. (2024). Inclusive Learning Brief.

[10] Learning for Justice. (2022). Gender-Inclusive Curriculum.

[11] NAEYC. (2022). Voices of Practitioners: Inviting Gender Exploration Through Play.

[12] Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2023). Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System.

[13] Digital Wellness Lab. (2024). Gender-Diverse Teens & Social Media Research Brief.

[14] Müller, V.C., et al. (2024). How Social is Social Media for Transgender and Gender-Diverse Adolescents? Child and Adolescent Psychiatry and Mental Health, 18, 25.

[15] Olson, K.R., Durwood, L., et al. (2015). Gender cognition in transgender children. Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, 112(50), 15468–15473.

[16] Olson, K.R., Durwood, L., DeMeules, M., & McLaughlin, K.A. (2016). Mental health of transgender children who are supported in their identities. Pediatrics, 137(3), e20153223.

[17] Durwood, L., DeMeules, M., et al. (2022). Gender Identity 5-Year Development of Socially Transitioned Children. Pediatrics, 149(3), e2021052680.

© 2025 Gender Spectrum. All rights reserved.