

Transgender and gender diverse children and young people



From an early age children are working out who they are. This includes their gender. Gender identity refers to our deep internal sense of being female or male, both or neither and how we express this in the world. For many children their gender and assumed sex at birth are one and the same, eg a child assumed female grows up feeling like a girl. Others experience their gender as different to their assumed sex.

Some transgender and gender diverse children and young people know from a young age their gender is not what others expect. This can be a confusing, lonely and often scary experience. A supportive and inclusive family environment helps children and young people feel loved and valued for who they are. They can explore the gender that is right for them and get any support they need.

This Guide

In this Guide the terms 'transgender'/'trans' and 'gender diverse' refer to children and young people with both binary genders (girl or boy) and non-binary genders (a blend of girl and boy or neither). 'Cisgender' refers to those whose gender is the same as the sex they were assigned at birth. The Guide does not address issues relevant to people who are intersex as these relate to differences in sex characteristics rather than gender diversity. Some intersex people may be trans or gender diverse, many are cisgender.

Gender

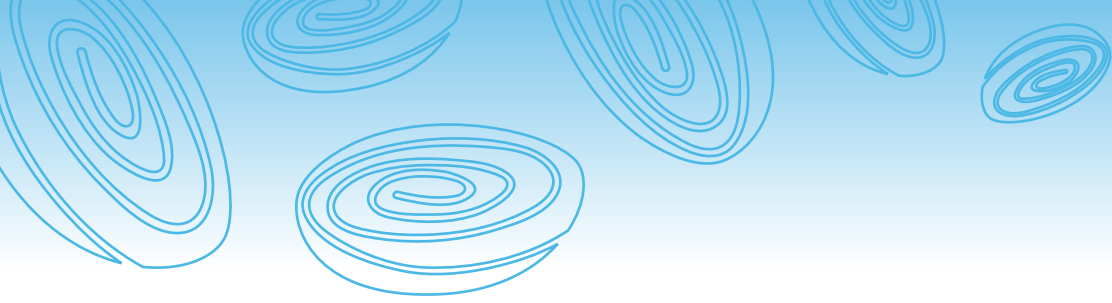
Because gender is central to how we see ourselves, it's easy to forget the key role society plays in shaping it. From birth onwards we learn what is expected of girls/women and boys/men. Yet so-called 'feminine' and 'masculine' traits and roles are often based on stereotypes which fail to reflect a full range of human diversity and gender expression. The idea that there are only two genders makes it difficult to even start a conversation about other possibilities and to acknowledge gender diverse people.

Health and wellbeing

While social awareness is increasing, transgender and gender diverse people often face discrimination, harassment and rejection. This can lead to anxiety, depression, self-harm and social isolation. Poor mental health and suicide risk are much higher for trans and gender diverse youth than their cisgender peers. An important protective factor is the love, acceptance and support of family. This helps children and young people build confidence in who they are and what they want in life.

Despite the many challenges, transgender and gender diverse people can live happy, fulfilling lives. When children and young people question their gender they are starting a journey of becoming who they truly are. The whole family can celebrate this.

While learning that your child is transgender or gender diverse can seem daunting at first, when supported to be their true selves children can flourish. This is what most parents want for their children.



Terminology

Terms change and evolve over time as knowledge increases and we learn from people's lived experience. It will help to ask your child or young person how they describe themselves and the terms they would like you to use.

- **Gender affirmation or transition** – the expression of a person's gender and its acknowledgement. Affirmation can be social, legal, medical
- **Gender binary** – refers to how societies such as ours generally recognise only two genders, boy/man or girl/woman. A number of cultures around the world including Aboriginal cultures have a broader understanding of gender
- **Gender expression** – how a person communicates their gender to others. This can include their name, the pronouns they use to refer to themselves (he/she/they), their appearance, and more
- **Gender fluid** – when a person's gender identity or expression or both change over time or in different situations
- **Gender questioning** – usually refers to someone who is unsure of or still exploring their gender
- **Intersex** – an umbrella term used to describe someone born with characteristics (physical, hormonal or chromosomal) that fall outside current medical definitions of female or male. This can have many variations and may be identified at birth, puberty, later in life or never
- **LGBTIQA+** – stands for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersex, Queer, Asexual and other sexually or gender diverse people
- **Misgendering** – when someone is referred to or addressed incorrectly, eg their name, pronouns. This can cause harm whether accidental or intentional

- **Non-binary** – can refer to a person whose gender is a blend of both girl/woman and boy/man. Genders that are different than a boy/man or girl/woman are also often described as non-binary. People may identify solely as non-binary or see this as an umbrella term and consider themselves genderfluid, genderqueer, bigender, agender or something else
- **Transgender or trans** – an umbrella term for someone whose gender is different from their assigned sex. A person assumed female at birth may have a male gender or the other way round. Some trans people identify as non-binary

Gender identity

At birth a child is classified as female or male based on physical characteristics. It has been generally assumed that a female infant will grow up feeling like a girl, or a boy if male. It is now widely recognised this is not necessarily the case, and that only individuals themselves can know their gender.

Many young children explore gender roles. They might like to dress up in clothes traditionally associated with a different gender or play with toys that don't fit gender stereotypes, eg girls playing with trucks, boys playing with dolls. They may take on a different gender role. Supporting this play as part of their healthy development helps all children explore the world and who they are.

As gender identity becomes established, for many this will be the same as the sex assigned to them at birth. For others, this won't mirror what is going on in their bodies or who they know themselves to be. They may feel more like a different gender or a blend of genders. Some may not feel like either a girl or boy.

Some children take a long time to explore their gender. Others may know from an early age their gender is different to the one expected of them.



Creating an inclusive home environment from the start helps all children develop a sense of belonging and wellbeing. This can include:

- speaking in an inclusive and respectful way. Children will listen to your words and attitudes to know whether they can talk to you about how they feel
- challenging traditional gender expectations. This gives a broader view of boys, girls and gender diversity and encourages children to be themselves
- trying not to use gendered language, eg 'girls and boys' when you mean 'children' or stereotypes, eg 'boys don't cry' so children feel safe to express themselves
- including more than 'girls' and 'boys' when you do talk about different genders, eg non-binary kids
- calling out disrespectful talk or behaviour among family and friends.

Gender dysphoria

Some transgender and gender diverse children and young people are comfortable with their identity. For others the lack of fit between their gender and body may be highly distressing. There can be emotional turmoil and physical discomfort. When this is the case, it is important to consult health professionals experienced in supporting gender diverse children and young people. They may identify gender dysphoria. They can provide counselling and discuss other options to reduce distress.

As puberty approaches young people may become concerned about unwanted physical changes, eg breast development or facial hair. It can help to know about reversible hormone blockers that delay such changes. This and any future options can be discussed with gender diversity specialists. Keep in mind the likelihood of long wait lists and the need for hormone blockers to start at the very beginning of puberty. This can be from age 9 if assumed female at birth and around age 11 if assumed male.



Many people feel they don't fit the role and stereotypes for their gender. For some their physical characteristics also don't feel right.

Gender affirmation

Gender affirmation, also known as transition, is a process that allows people to live more genuinely as themselves. While some people might not want any type of affirmation, for others being transgender or gender diverse may include:

- a change of name
- a change of pronouns
- looking and dressing differently
- being socially recognised as another gender
- use of hormone/puberty blockers.

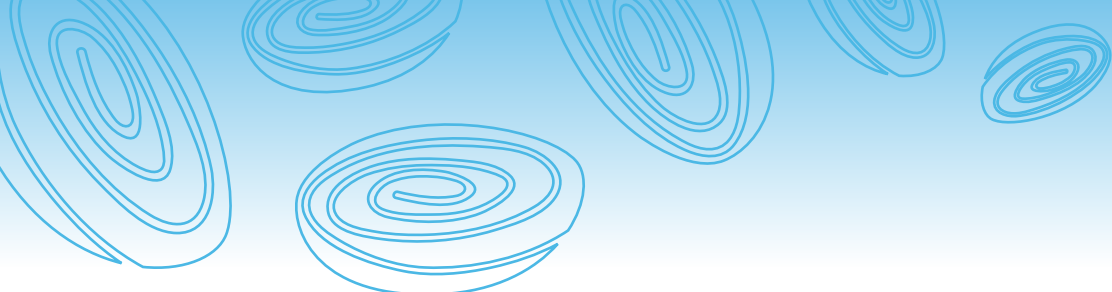
Some people may change their personal details legally, eg birth certificate, passport.

Other options include:

- hormone therapy. This can be accessed from age 15 with parental consent. Although parents' consent is not required from age 16 family support remains crucial
- gender affirming surgery from age 18.

Gender affirmation takes place over time and may require additional support from family, friends or professionals. Help your child or young person get as much information as possible about their options.

Studies show a supportive family can make a big difference. When trans or gender diverse children and young people feel loved, respected and valued it helps build their confidence and resilience. They are likely to have better physical and mental health now and in the future.



Gender and sexual attraction

It's important not to assume that being transgender or gender diverse leads to a particular sexuality, eg being 'gay'. Gender identity does not determine a person's sexuality. These are two different things. Like all young people, those who are transgender or gender diverse may be attracted to:

- people of a different gender
- people of their own gender
- people of multiple genders, not always equally.

Some young people may be asexual and experience no sexual attraction. Others may still be working out who they are attracted to. Just like gender, a young person's sexuality is an ongoing discovery.

When your child invites you in

Some parents may feel comfortable to start the conversation about their child's gender identity. Others learn about it from their young person and can react in various ways.

Some may see it as just a part of who their child is and support them from the start. Some parents may have wondered about it and be pleased they can now talk openly. Others might need time to adjust, but are happy their child or young person trusts them enough to share this part of themselves. Some parents can worry about what this may mean for their child's future.

Others may deny, disbelieve or hope this will pass. They can feel shocked, angry, guilty, disappointed or ashamed. It may challenge their values and beliefs, especially some religious or cultural beliefs. They might feel embarrassed and anxious about the reactions of family members or friends.

Some parents may not accept their child or young person's gender identity. This can lead to a hurtful break in family relationships. The feeling of being rejected and the lack of support for who they are increase the risk of poor mental health, homelessness and suicide.



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To tell a parent you are transgender or gender diverse takes great courage. They know it could change how you feel about them. They might worry they will lose your love.

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Why is my child or young person questioning their gender?

Parents often ask why their child or young person is identifying as gender diverse. Are they rebelling? Are they influenced by others? Is it a phase? Can it be changed? We don't actually know why some people's internal sense of gender is different from what was assumed for them at birth. We do know that throughout history gender diversity has always existed regardless of whether it was socially acceptable or not. It is now widely recognised by medical and psychological professions as a part of natural human variation to be affirmed and supported.

Our gender is what feels right and normal to us even if different from how others express it. If you ask a cisgender person if they chose to be the gender they are they would likely say 'No, I was born this way – it's just the way I am and I couldn't be anything else'. It's no different for transgender or gender diverse people.

With the harassment and discrimination that exists, most people would not be on this path if it didn't feel a vital part of who they are and important for their health and wellbeing.

Although your child or young person is unlikely to be going through a phase, permanent changes such as surgery can only take place from age 18 after very thorough assessment. In the meantime their gender can be affirmed socially.



Did I do something wrong?

Parents may worry they did something wrong and could be 'to blame' for their child or young person's gender. There is no evidence that parenting styles or family circumstances determine gender identity. Feeling blame implies there is something wrong with a child's gender expression and this is not true. Parents can be an important influence now by creating a supportive environment for their child or young person to safely explore their gender.

Why didn't they tell me before?

You may feel hurt, angry or guilty because your young person didn't tell you earlier. It is important to realise they probably couldn't. They may have:

- needed time to work it out for themselves
- worried about hurting you, or felt guilty about ruining your hopes and dreams for them
- experienced negative attitudes, been harassed or bullied, rejected by their friends or seen this happen to others. Your rejection might have been too much to risk.

It says something about your relationship that they have shared this with you now. It shows they want to include you in all parts of their life despite their fears or anxiety.

Some ways to respond

The most important thing is that your child or young person knows you love them and are proud of them. Tell them how pleased you are they trust you enough to share this part of themselves with you. It also helps to:

- keep an open heart and mind. Be willing to listen, even if you feel uncomfortable. It may be hard to hear what they say but it's also hard for them to tell you
- not react if you have strong negative feelings. Let them know you need time to think and agree to talk later. When you are ready, approach the topic as calmly and openly as possible
- don't assume any particular outcome if they are

still working out who they are, eg that they will be transgender or 'gay'

- learn as much as you can from reliable sources, eg the lived experience of trans and gender diverse people and those who support them. This will help you understand what is happening for your child and point to things you can discuss together
- be patient with yourself and others. It can take time to deal with all the fears and myths about transgender and gender diverse people
- get support from people who understand what you are going through. Services listed at the end of this Guide can be a good place to start.

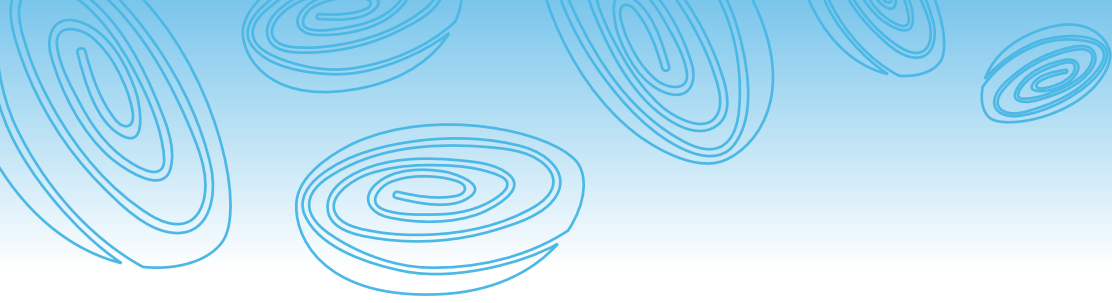
The best thing to say when your young person talks about their gender is 'I love you and I am here for you'. They need your love, respect and understanding now more than ever.

Supporting your child

It can strengthen your relationship to explore what is happening for your child or young person and how you can support them, just as you would with any other issue.

- Listen carefully and try to understand their experience.
- Go at their pace. They may still be trying to work it out.
- Ask what you can do to make the conversation easier. Avoid giving a lecture.
- Ask questions and be honest about anything you don't understand. There may be something they would like you to read or look at.
- Reassure them there are other trans or gender diverse children or young people. They may wish to connect with a support or advocacy group.





- Respect their wishes regarding privacy and confidentiality. They have placed their trust in you. It's up to them if and when they wish to tell others, including family members.
- Don't say too much about any concerns you have. These are best talked through with others who understand gender diversity.
- Ask how you can best support them.
- Give them space if they need it but keep the door open to ongoing conversations. It can be easier to talk when travelling in the car, going for a walk, washing the dishes.
- Finding information or other people's personal stories can help your understanding and be good conversation starters with your child or young person.
- Continue doing the things you enjoy together. They are the same child you have always loved.

Any other children in the family will still need your support and guidance. You can work out together how they might support their gender diverse sibling.

Let them know they can talk to you at any time. If they don't want to talk to you, make sure they have accurate information and other trusted people to talk to.

Encourage self-worth

It is important that children and young people feel confident about who they are. For those who are transgender or gender diverse this can be challenging. Being themselves means going against what society expects of 'girls' and 'boys' or feeling that their body doesn't fit who they are. Every day they may have to decide how to answer personal questions. It's a lot to deal with.

You can help by:

- acknowledging their courage
- supporting them to
 - be comfortable with who they are
 - have a positive attitude about their gender
 - be respectful to themselves and others
 - make healthy, safe choices
- encouraging activities they love – eg art, music, dance, sport.

Other types of support

It's important that any decisions and actions are guided by what your child or young person needs and wants.

- They may wish to be known by a different name, one that more accurately reflects their gender. Using their own gender descriptions, eg 'transgender', 'non-binary' and pronouns, eg she/he/they/or others shows the respect cisgender people take for granted.
- If you have your child's permission, talk with family members, friends, teachers about using their chosen name and pronouns.
- Support their friendships with others on a similar journey.
- Be their advocate when needed, eg having their gender affirmed and supported at school, sporting clubs, services.
- Help them find accurate information and support.



- Connect them with gender diversity services, especially if they seem upset, confused or distressed.
- Encourage their confidence and resilience.
- Help them think about what to do if there is bullying or discrimination. Take steps to keep them safe when necessary.
- Keep letting them know how much you love them and how proud you are of who they are.

You might not have all the answers and may make mistakes along the way. That's OK. Any efforts to understand what your child is going through will let them know you care and that home is a place where they can be themselves and belong.

Looking after yourself

By affirming your trans or gender diverse child you are supporting and celebrating who they really are. At the same time there may be a sense of grief or loss. Just like your child, you too will benefit from feeling supported and affirmed. Building a network of care and support is important for your own health and wellbeing, and makes it easier to support loved ones.

- Sharing experiences and information with others in the same situation can really help. Make sure your child or young person is comfortable about who you are disclosing their gender identity to.
- Be kind to yourself if you don't always get it right. You are learning just like your child or young person. Use mistakes to help you move forward.
- Acknowledge the ways you are helping your child or young person to be themselves.
- Seek professional support. You may prefer to talk to someone who understands gender diversity.
- Look after your own physical and emotional needs. Make time to do things that relax and recharge you.

Note: The term 'Parents' in this Guide refers to anyone caring for and/or raising children and young people, eg parents, caregivers, step-parents, grandparents, guardians, foster or kinship carers.

Want more information?

Health services

SA Women's and Children's Hospital Gender Diversity Service

Medical and mental health service for trans and gender diverse children and young people. Referrals accepted for anyone up to 17 years of age www.wch.sa.gov.au/patients-visitors/adolescents/gender-diversity-adolescents

Trans Health South Australia

Information and links to services/resources www.transhealthsa.com/

SHINE SA

SHINE welcomes people from all genders, cultures, sexual orientations and abilities. Services include sexual and reproductive health, counselling and Gender Wellbeing Service <https://shinesa.org.au/community-information/sexual-gender-diversity/>

Support and resources for parents/carers

Transcend Australia

National network providing peer and community support, resources and advocacy for parents supporting trans, gender diverse and non-binary children <https://transcend.org.au/>
See also 'A Guide for Parents and Carers: Supporting your Trans, Gender Diverse or Non-Binary Child at School' http://transcend.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/Transcend_A-Guide-for-Parents-Carers-1.pdf

Parents of Gender Diverse Children

Peer support, information, referrals and advocacy www.pgdc.org.au/for_parents

The Gender Centre

'First steps: Supporting and caring for transgender children: Shared stories and information from parents and caregivers' https://gendercentre.org.au/images/Services/Youth_Support/FIRST_STEPS_master.pdf

TransHub

Information about gender diverse children of all ages www.transhub.org.au/allies/families

Royal Children's Hospital, Melbourne

Information on gender dysphoria www.rch.org.au/kidsinfo/fact_sheets/Gender_dysphoria

Headspace

'Understanding gender identity - for family and friends' and links to resources <https://headspace.org.au/explore-topics/supporting-a-young-person/gender-identity/>

Beyond Blue

'Families like mine: A guide for parents and families of young people who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, gender diverse or who are questioning their sexuality or gender identity' www.beyondblue.org.au/who-does-it-affect/lesbian-gay-bi-trans-and-intersex-lgbti-people/families-like-mine

Reach Out

Information for parents of gender diverse young people <https://parents.au.reachout.com/search?q=Gender%20and%20teenagers&page=1>

Raising Children Network

Gender diversity parenting information <https://raisinchildren.net.au/search?querv=aender+diversity>





Department for Education (DE)

DE is committed to ensuring all government schools and preschools are safe and inclusive. Ask your child's school or preschool how they support gender diverse students
www.education.sa.gov.au/parents-and-families/safety-and-wellbeing/gender-diverse-intersex-and-sexually-diverse-children-and-young-people

Department for Child Protection

'Supporting LGBTIQ+ children and young people in care'
www.childprotection.sa.gov.au/carers/resources-for-carers/supporting-lgbtqi-children-and-young-people-in-care

Parenting SA

For other Parent Easy Guides including 'Children and learning about sexuality', 'Talking sex with young people', 'Young people who are gay, lesbian or bisexual', 'Living with young people' and 'Young people, feelings and depression' www.parenting.sa.gov.au

Services and resources for children and young people (and families)

Kids Helpline

Phone 1800 551 800 any time day or night
Phone and online support for children and young people aged 5-25 years and their families <https://kidshelpline.com.au>

QLife

Phone 1800 184 527
Free LGBTI peer support via phone and webchat from 3pm to midnight every day <https://qlife.org.au/>

Transmasc SA

Phone 1800 184 527
Support group for transgender and gender diverse boys/men aged 12 years and over www.transhealthsa.com/trans-specific-groups/

Minus18

Youth-led LGBTQIA+ network - information and resources
<https://minus18.org.au/>

Bfriend

Phone (08) 8202 5190 or email bfriend@unitingcommunities.org
Information and support for gender diverse people of all ages and their loved ones www.unitingcommunities.org/service/community-support/lgbtqi-support

Headspace

Phone 1800 650 890
Talk face to face, by phone or chat online www.eHeadSpace.org.au
Support and counselling for young people aged 12-25 and their families
Find your local centre at www.headspace.org.au
Information, support, resources for gender diverse young people
<https://headspace.org.au/lgbtqiaplus/>

Youth Beyond Blue

Phone 1300 224 636 or chat online
www.beyondblue.org.au/who-does-it-affect/young-people
Information and resources on anxiety and depression for gender diverse young people
www.beyondblue.org.au/who-does-it-affect/lesbian-gay-bi-trans-and-intersex-lgbti-people

The Rainbow Owl

Books and resources for young people, parents and others
www.the-rainbow-owl.com



**Government of
South Australia**

Parenting SA

A partnership between the Department of Human Services and the Women's and Children's Health Network

Ph: 08 8303 1660
www.parenting.sa.gov.au

Parent Easy Guides are free in South Australia.

Important: This information is not intended to replace advice from a qualified practitioner.

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