



Positive  
Prevention  
*Plus*

## Sexual Health Education for America's Youth

# APPENDIX C



Resources for  
LGBTQ+ Youth  
and Gender Equity

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# Suggested Adaptations & Resources for LGBTQ+ Youth

Adapted from Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbian and Gays (PFLAG)  
<http://community.pflag.org>

## Learn the Language

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Using respectful and appropriate language is an important benchmark to set a tone of respect and understanding. Language is important but don't let it become a barrier. Learn the following words and definitions and you will be able to have conversations and put people at ease. As long as you are respectful, do not be afraid to ask if you are unfamiliar with a word or how it is used.

**Sex** – A biological and physiological term dividing a species into male or female, usually based on sex chromosomes; hormone levels, secondary sex characteristics and internal and external genitalia may also be considered criteria. Also, another term for sexual intercourse.

**Sexual Orientation** – Sexual orientation refers to one's sexual and romantic attraction. All people have a sexual orientation. You can be attracted to people of the opposite sex (straight) or people of the same sex (gay or lesbian). You can also be attracted to people of either sex (bisexual). Orientation does not equal action – you do not need to have had a sexual experience to know your orientation. Avoid using the term “sexual preference,” as it implies a choice, or homosexual, as it is a dated term that focuses only on sex rather than love and relationships.

**Intersex** – A general term used for a variety of conditions in which a person is born with a reproductive or sexual anatomy that doesn't fit the typical definitions of female and male. For example, a person may be born appearing to be female on the outside, but having mostly male-typical anatomy on the inside. (Source: Intersex Society of North America)

**Gender Identity** – Gender identity refers to a person's internal sense of being male, female or something in between. For many people, their gender identity corresponds with their biological sex (i.e., a person assigned female at birth identifies as female or a person assigned male at birth identifies as male), but this is not always the case.

**Gender Expression** – Gender expression refers to how people choose to communicate their gender identity to others through clothing, hair, styles, mannerisms, etc. This communication may be conscious or subconscious. While most people's understandings of gender expressions relate to masculinity and femininity, there are countless permutations that may combine both masculine and feminine expressions.

**Gay** – A man whose primary romantic and sexual attraction is to other males. Gay is also used as an inclusive term encompassing gay men, lesbians and people who identify as bisexual.

**Lesbian** – A woman whose primary romantic and sexual attraction is to other females. However, many women who are attracted to other women may choose to use the terms “gay” or “queer” in referring to themselves.

**Bisexual** – Men and women who have sexual and romantic attraction to both men and women. Depending on the person, his or her attraction may be stronger to women or men, or they may be approximately equal.



**Transgender** – A broad term describing the state of a person’s gender identity which does not necessarily match his/her given gender at birth.

**Queer** – Some gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender young people use the word queer as an umbrella term to embrace all the members of the community including the children of LGBTQ+ parents and other allies. There are still plenty of people in the community who find this term offensive or degrading.

**HELPFUL HINT:** It is important to hear and understand terminology from the perspective of whomever you are conversing with. For young people, the terminology presented here is often about romantic notions, ideas of identity and self-discovery, rather than the political or sexual context these words may evoke for older audiences. Using the chosen term, without judgment, can make all the difference in the world to a struggling youth.

## Learn the Facts

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School officials often believe there are no lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender students in their classrooms, and as a result, often fail to take action to protect young people. In reality, however, students report being frequently targeted, bullied and harassed based on their real or perceived sexual orientation or gender identity.

As a result of the teasing and harassment that students face, they are at higher risk for depression, suicide and dropping out of school.

**The reality LGBTQ+ students face, on a daily basis, is striking:**

73.6% heard derogatory remarks such as “faggot” or “dyke” frequently at school.

86.2% of LGBTQ+ students reported being verbally harassed, 44.1% reported being physically harassed and 22.1% reported being physically assaulted at school in the past year because of their sexual orientation.

More than half (60.8%) of students reported that they felt unsafe in school because of their sexual orientation, and more than a third (38.4%) felt unsafe because of their gender expression.

**The consequences of a negative classroom environment are real and far-reaching:**

31.7% of LGBTQ+ students missed a class and 32.7% missed a day of school in the past month because of feeling unsafe, compared to only 5.5% and 4.5%, respectively, of a national sample of secondary school students.

The reported grade point average of students who were more frequently harassed because of their sexual orientation or gender expression was almost half a grade lower than for students who were less often harassed (2.8 versus 2.4).

## Stop Bad Behavior

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LGBTQ+ youth, and those perceived to be LGBTQ+, endure constant bullying and harassment: in the classroom, hallways, locker rooms and on the bus. But bullying is more than disturbing, it is also dangerous and disruptive.

When students feel unsafe at school, they are also unable to learn. It is imperative that adults in the school community stop bullying whenever, and wherever, it happens.

**Three key points to remember:**

- **Don’t ignore discriminatory behaviors:** Unchecked behavior will repeat itself again and again.
- **Don’t excuse discriminatory behaviors:** They need to be addressed.
- **Don’t be immobilized by fear:** Not taking action can endanger kids and make the classroom unsafe.



## Managing Harassment DOs:

- DO deal with the situation immediately.
- DO confirm that the particular type of abuse is hurtful and harmful and will not be tolerated.
- DO value everyone's feelings by listening carefully.
- DO take those involved aside and discuss the incident.
- DO impose consequences consistent with school or classroom policy.
- DO use it as a “teachable moment” if appropriate, so all students learn what is acceptable and what is not in your classroom.

## ...And Managing the DON'Ts:

- DON'T let harassment pass unchallenged.
- DON'T overreact with a put-down to the off ender.
- DON'T impose consequences before finding out exactly what happened from all involved.
- DON'T embarrass either party publicly.
- DON'T assume the incident is isolated.

**HELPFUL HINT:** Casual comments can have unintended consequences. While young people may use phrases such as “that’s so gay” or “faggot” in circumstances where they are not meant to be destructive, other students receive such remarks with offense. Regardless of whether there is a specific target, or a specific, malicious intent behind such words, it is important that adults step in, stop their use and explain why they are harmful.

## Set the Policy

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A strong and inclusive anti-harassment policy not only protects students, it also protects the school. To avoid possible legal action, school systems should have concrete policies and back policies up with training and education for the entire school community.

**Sample Policy** (Model policy of NCLR, National Center for Lesbian Rights):

*The [Your School District] School District is committed to providing all students, teachers, employees and staff with a safe and supportive school environment in which all members of the school community are treated with respect.*

*It is hereby the policy of the [Your School District] School District to prohibit harassment based on real or perceived race, color, religion (creed), national origin, marital status, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, disability, or on the basis of association with others identified by these categories. This policy is intended to comply with [Your State] state as well as federal requirements. The School District shall act to investigate all complaints of harassment, formal or informal, verbal or written, and to discipline or take other appropriate action against any member of the school community who is found to have violated this policy.*

## School-Wide Activities

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Once the school has developed and adopted the appropriate policies, it must provide assistance with the challenge of implementing the new or improved policy.

It is critical that every member of the school community – including students, parents, teachers and administrators – understand the school’s commitment to protecting students, and what is expected of both young people and adults in order to live up to that commitment. There are numerous tools available, and numerous ways to convey your message.



## Films:

Showing a film, and conducting a discussion after, is an effective way to reach every member of the school and get every stakeholder – including youth, parents and teachers – involved in the discussion. Groundspark Films offers three highly-acclaimed films with associated curriculum guides, available at [www.groundspark.org](http://www.groundspark.org)

- *It's a Family* (for elementary schools)
- *Let's Get Real* (for middle schools)
- *Straightlaced* (for high schools)

## Books:

Providing books and resources in your school library is a critical step toward educating everyone. Find out what the policy is for placing books in the library. Select books that will reflect the needs and diversity of your community. To get started, the Safe Schools Coalition ([www.safeschoolscoalition.org](http://www.safeschoolscoalition.org)) has book recommendations by age. For more lists and suggestions, contact PFLAG.

## Programs:

School-wide programs offer an opportunity for everyone to learn and participate. These programs help build community, empathy and understanding:

- **Use Another Word** ([www.safeschoolscoalition.org/UseAnotherWord.pdf](http://www.safeschoolscoalition.org/UseAnotherWord.pdf)) This program, appropriate for students of all ages, can be tailored to meet the specific needs of diverse school communities. The program includes poster-making activities and offers creative and positive alternatives to put-downs and teasing.
- **Mix It Up** ([www.mixitup.org](http://www.mixitup.org)) Started in 2006, Mix It Up is a nationwide campaign conducted each November – geared to elementary and middle school students – that supports students who want to identify with, question or cross social boundaries that separate them from each other. Free resources are available for using the program in your school.
- **Day of Silence** ([www.dayofsilence.org](http://www.dayofsilence.org)) The Day of Silence is a student-led day of action when concerned students – from middle school through college – take a vow of silence in solidarity with their LGBTQ+ classmates. The program highlights name-calling, bullying and harassment experienced by LGBTQ+ students and their allies.

**HELPFUL HINT:** Remember not to allow gender stereotypes or norms to unnecessarily impact your responses to students who are LGBTQ+. It is important to understand that, in most situations, behavior that is appropriate for opposite sex couples is also appropriate for same-sex couples. For example, if you would condone a male and female student walking hand-in-hand, also understand that similar behavior is appropriate for two female, or two male, students. Appropriate behavior is almost always gender-neutral.

## Be Public

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Taking public stands will send a message to students that their safety is more than just a policy, but a practice emulated by the school community. Safety is more than just policy, meaning adults, especially, should “go public” with their support for diversity and opposition to bullying and harassment. Signs, stickers and other public displays that reiterate a strong commitment to every student’s safety are important reminders – to students and adults – that being vigilant about curbing inappropriate behavior is a daily task. To find out how to get Safe Schools posters and stickers, email Suzanne Greenfield ([sgreenfield@pflag.org](mailto:sgreenfield@pflag.org)) today!



## **Come Out as a Public Ally**

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Make sure your library has LGBTQ+ friendly, age-appropriate books and resources.

Have “teachable moments” – not every language correction, bullying prevention or calling out of stereotypes needs to be behind closed doors.

Counselors, teachers, nurses, social workers – have some symbol of your willingness to talk and listen to issues of diversity. Sometime all a student needs to open up is a sign that you are willing to listen. Try using the PFLAG safe schools stickers!

Establish an anti-bullying task force and be sure to include parents, students and staff. A task force gives the school community a way to have an impact on school safety and establishes that stopping bullying and harassment is a priority in the school.



# Cyber Bullying

Cyber bullying has been defined by the Center for Safe and Responsible Internet Use to mean “being cruel to others by sending or posting harmful material using the Internet or a cell phone.”

According to Pew Research, about one third (32%) of all teenagers who use the Internet say they have been targets of some form of cyber bullying ranging from receiving threatening messages and having their private e-mails or text messages forwarded to having an embarrassing picture posted or rumors about them spread online. Cyber bullying is the new frontier in bullying and anti-gay rumors, messages and threats are oft en at the center of this high-tech harassment.

## Terms You Should Know

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**Flaming** – online verbal attacks or fights via electronic messages

**Harassment** – repeated messages of an offensive or derogatory nature.

**Cyberstalking** – repeated messages of an intimidating character that make a person feel afraid for his or her physical safety.

**Denigration** – online “put-downs,” including sending or posting hurtful gossip or rumors to cause the target embarrassment.

**Impersonation** – using someone’s e-mail account to send out messages, supposedly from the account holder, that reflect badly on that person and may cause trouble, shame or embarrassment.

**Outing and Trickery** – disclosure of someone’s private information online, sending or posting embarrassing images or deceptions leading another person to reveal personal details about him or herself.

**Exclusion** – deliberately keeping someone out of an online group, such as a buddy list.

## What Students Should Understand

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- There can be consequences to actions you take online (schools, jobs, personal).
- You do not always know who you are talking to.
- Your messages can be re-broadcast to others.
- Tell an adult immediately if you receive a threatening, harassing or upsetting message.
- Remember: never give out personal information online.
- Items that are posted online or texted can be traced to their original source.





## What Schools Should Do

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- Add cyber bullying to existing anti-harassment or bullying policies.
- Provide training and education for students, teachers and parents.
- Take cyber bullying seriously.

## Train and Educate Everyone

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It is imperative that the faculty is trained to respond to bullying in ways that support every student. Some faculty may not be familiar with LGBTQ+ topics, or may feel uncomfortable handling situations that arise.

Every adult, however, has a responsibility to keep students safe, and there are several simple steps each person can take in accomplishing this goal.

Begin with a school survey that presents an opportunity to faculty to review the school environment, and gives administrators an important perspective on what is happening in your particular school community.

*Let's Get Real*, a national safe schools curriculum created by Groundspark as part of the film by the same name, provides an effective, simple survey for use in schools.

It is important that after evaluating the school environment, administrators develop and implement a training that meets concerns raised by the survey. Remember that most harassment and bullying do not take place in classrooms, but rather in the hallway, cafeteria, playground or locker room. Adults who supervise these areas must be included in trainings in order to effectively address the reality students are encountering every day.

There are many locally-based organizations that can provide trainings. Contact PFLAG ([www.PFLAG.org](http://www.PFLAG.org)) and let them help you find one.

## Comprehensive Health

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Harassment can also be the result of an incomplete or inaccurate education. Comprehensive sexuality education that includes age-appropriate and medically sound education is of paramount importance.

Youth must have a clear understanding of their bodies and health in order to respect themselves and their classmates.

**It is particularly important that schools avoid abstinence-only education, which excludes LGBTQ+ youth from important information and lessons.**

- Funding for abstinence-only education is provided only for programs where marriage is strictly defined as a union between one man and one woman, leaving LGBTQ+ youth feeling isolated and excluded.
- In abstinence-only programs, LGBTQ+ youth are told they simply cannot have healthy, safe or valid sexual experiences, a dangerous myth with far-reaching, negative consequences.

An appropriate, comprehensive curriculum should:

- Include age-appropriate, medically accurate information;
- Not teach or promote a religious perspective;
- Teach that abstinence is the only certain way to avoid pregnancy or STDs;
- Stress the value of abstinence while not ignoring young people who have had, or are having, sexual experiences;
- Provide accurate information about the health benefits of condoms and other methods to reduce the risk of STDs.



Remember when developing your curriculum that parents overwhelmingly support teaching about sexual orientation at school. Three out of four parents feel comfortable speaking to their children about sexual orientation, but are unlikely to raise the topic on their own.

To overcome bias against LGBTQ+ youth, sexuality education programs must consider and include information about sexual orientation.

- 79% of parents want their children to learn about sexual orientation in sexuality education classes at school.
- 67% of parents believe their children should be taught that gay people are just like other people.

For more information, see: *What Does Gay Mean: How to Talk with Kids about Sexual Orientation* (San Francisco, CA: Horizons Foundation, 2001)



# Resources

In addition to PFLAG, there are many other organizations and resources available to assist schools as they address issues surrounding harassment, bullying, safe spaces and LGBTQ+ youth.

## Safe Schools Materials:

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**The Safe Schools Coalition** is an international public-private partnership that provides free resources categorized by age, audience and activity. It is comprehensive and easily navigated, an excellent source for ideas and materials. [www.safeschoolscoalition.org](http://www.safeschoolscoalition.org)

**Groundspark** produces educational videos including: *It's Elementary, It's Still Elementary* (about teaching kids about LGBTQ+ people and issues), *Straightlaced* (about the impact of anti-LGBTQ+ attitudes and gender stereotypes on teenagers), *That's a Family* (about the diversity of families), and *Let's Get Real* (about middle school bullying). [www.groundspark.org](http://www.groundspark.org)

**Teaching Tolerance** provides free educational materials to teachers and other school practitioners. Web-exclusive offerings include curricula, activities and materials for youth, teachers and parents. [www.tolerance.org](http://www.tolerance.org)

**The Trevor Project** operates the only nationwide, around-the-clock crisis and suicide prevention helpline for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and questioning youth. [www.thetrevorproject.org](http://www.thetrevorproject.org)

**Lamda Legal** provides legal counsel and court analysis of legal protections for students and schools. [www.lambdalegal.org](http://www.lambdalegal.org)

**Advocates for Youth** is a youth-led movement to help young people make informed and responsible decisions about their reproductive and sexual health. [www.advocatesforyouth.org/glbtc.htm](http://www.advocatesforyouth.org/glbtc.htm)

## Cyber Bullying Resources:

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A program of the **Anti-Defamation League (ADL)** that helps schools develop a comprehensive approach to confront harassment and bullying through electronic media. [www.adl.org/education/cyberbullying](http://www.adl.org/education/cyberbullying)

This site focuses on text messaging and the ways to address this type of bullying. [www.stoptextbully.com/help/15/advice-for-parents-and-teachers](http://www.stoptextbully.com/help/15/advice-for-parents-and-teachers)

An interactive web site for parents, teachers and youth about internet safety. [www.netsmartz.org](http://www.netsmartz.org)

## Sex Ed Resources:

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**A community action kit** for establishing comprehensive and age-appropriate sex education in school. [www.communityactionkit.org/index.cfm?pageid=882](http://www.communityactionkit.org/index.cfm?pageid=882)

**SIECUS** – the Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States-provides education and information about sexuality and sexual and reproductive health. [www.siecus.org](http://www.siecus.org)

**Comprehensive sexuality education guide** written by the Seattle and King County Public Health Department in Washington State. [www.kingcounty.gov/healthservices/health/personal/famplan/educators.aspx](http://www.kingcounty.gov/healthservices/health/personal/famplan/educators.aspx)

**Gender Spectrum** [www.genderspectrum.org/about](http://www.genderspectrum.org/about)

**Trans Youth Family Allies** [www.imatyfa.org](http://www.imatyfa.org)



**COLAGE** [www.colage.org](http://www.colage.org)

**Make It Better Project** [www.makeitbetterproject.org](http://www.makeitbetterproject.org)

**Advocates for Youth** [www.advocatesforyouth.org](http://www.advocatesforyouth.org)

Please see the **CDC** website for a list of very important resources for young people, teachers and administrators.  
[www.cdc.gov/lgbthealth/youth-resources.htm](http://www.cdc.gov/lgbthealth/youth-resources.htm)



# What Can You Do?

## 10 Things Teachers and Schools Can Do to Create Safer Environments for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgendered (LGBT) and Gender Equity Students

Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgendered (LGBT) and Gender Equity students face tremendous discrimination and harassment in schools on a daily basis. In 2007, 86.2% of LGBT students in the U.S. experienced at least one incident of harassment and 60.8% reported feeling unsafe. Despite good laws in California that protect LGBT students against harassment and discrimination (the California Student Safety and Violence Prevention Act of 2000), most schools have yet to fully create safe learning environments for all students. Below are 10 things that schools and school districts can do.

1. Stop behavior when you see it, each and every time. Then, talk about and process why you stopped the behavior with the participants of the incident.
2. Train teachers and staff to intervene when they hear slurs or negative comments based on sexual orientation and sex, including gender identity, appearance and behavior of and other protected groups.
3. Develop nondiscrimination policies in your district that include sexual orientation and gender identity. This is necessary for districts to be in compliance with California law.
4. Inform through verbal and written notice all students, teachers and staff of existing processes for filing complaints against homophobic and transphobic harassment and discrimination.
5. Ensure that administrators and teachers treat all reported incidents of homophobic and transphobic harassment and discrimination as equally as other serious violations of school policies.
6. Support the establishment of a Gay Straight Alliance student club at your school.
7. Ensure that students and staff know where to get information and support related to sexual orientation and gender identity.
8. Introduce school curriculum that includes lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people and age-appropriate information about sexual orientation and gender identity.
9. Recognize and acknowledge that passing a non-discrimination policy is only the first step in creating a safe and non-discriminatory school environment. Verbal and written notification of existing state law, mandatory training for staff and students and inclusive curriculum are the keys to fully implementing a non-discrimination policy.
10. Utilize available community-based trainers and support staff, parents and students who are interested in conducting trainings.

For support making these changes at your school, contact GSA Network at [info@gsanetwork.org](mailto:info@gsanetwork.org) or 415.552.4229.

GLSEN 2007 National School Climate Survey.  
<http://www.glsen.org/cgi-bin/iowa/all/library/record/2340.html?state=research>



## **For More Information:**

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### **California Safe Schools Coalition**

[www.casafeschools.org](http://www.casafeschools.org)

### **National Safe Schools Coalition**

[www.safeschoolscoalition.org](http://www.safeschoolscoalition.org)

### **California Department of Education's Guide on Filing Complaints**

[www.cde.ca.gov/re/cp/uc/](http://www.cde.ca.gov/re/cp/uc/)

### **California Department of Education's AB 537 Recommendations**

[www.cde.ca.gov/ls/ss/se/documents/ab537report.pdf](http://www.cde.ca.gov/ls/ss/se/documents/ab537report.pdf)

### **San Francisco Unified School District**

*School Health Programs Department: Exercise for Establishing Classroom Rules*

[www.healthiersf.org/LGBTQ/GetTheFacts/pol-antislur.html](http://www.healthiersf.org/LGBTQ/GetTheFacts/pol-antislur.html)

### **Creating a Safe Classroom**

[www.healthiersf.org/LGBTQ/InTheClassroom/safeClassroom.html](http://www.healthiersf.org/LGBTQ/InTheClassroom/safeClassroom.html)

### **What do you say to “That’s So Gay”**

[www.healthiersf.org/LGBTQ/InTheClassroom/safeClassroom-whatsay.html](http://www.healthiersf.org/LGBTQ/InTheClassroom/safeClassroom-whatsay.html)

### **Gay Straight Alliance Network**

[www.gaystraightalliance.org](http://www.gaystraightalliance.org)

[GSANetwork.org](http://GSANetwork.org)

### **Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays**

[www.PFLAG.org](http://www.PFLAG.org)

### **Step In Speak Up**

*Online teacher training program*

[www.kognito.com](http://www.kognito.com)



# What Works for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Questioning, Queer, and Intersex (LGBTQQI) Students in Adolescent Health Education

It is important that all youth find sexual health education to be relevant, meaningful and engaging. Given that LGBTQQI young people face disproportionately higher rates of HIV, STIs, and teen pregnancy, it is vital that their health promotion and prevention education needs are met by sexual health education they receive at school. Furthermore, studies show that LGBT curriculum inclusion correlates with greater feelings of safety for students and reduced rates of anti-LGBT harassment.

When we include information and examples that resonate with LGBTQQI students, we not only provide accurate, meaningful tools to help them make healthy choices, but we create an environment that acknowledges the sexual health complexities that ALL youth face. For example, it is not only LGBTQQI youth who experience harassment and bullying in schools, it is also students who are perceived to be LGBTQQI based on their gender expression or any other attribute that may not be the social norm. Similarly, we know that gender non-conforming youth often receive the brunt of harassment and bullying in schools. But gender stereotypes that teach girls to be passive or encourage boys to hide their emotions affect every young person's ability to communicate effectively, self advocate and ultimately make healthy choices. For these reasons and others, it is absolutely imperative that we make a concerted effort to present sexual health curriculum in a way that is fair, accurate, and inclusive.

To ensure that your sexual health education efforts are inclusive and relevant for LGBTQQI youth, Gay-Straight Alliance Network has reviewed this curriculum guide and helped the Red Cross make updates to ensure that 1) the curriculum is inclusive of the sexual health information needs of LGBTQQI youth, 2) the terminology used is inclusive of LGBTQQI youth, and 3) the curriculum does not have a heterocentric bias, that is a bias towards heterosexual relationships as the only valid or normal relationships.

Additionally, there are a few things to remember. First, since LGBTQQI students may not be forthcoming about their sexual orientation and/or gender identity, you should always assume that your audience includes lesbian, gay, bisexual, queer, questioning and/or intersex students. Do not rely on stereotypes about heterosexuality or homosexuality to decide whether or not to teach for/about LGBTQQI students/subjects, since often those stereotypes are damaging and/or inaccurate. Second, be mindful that your ability to successfully teach inclusive LGBTQQI curriculum can significantly reduce harassment and bullying, and increase safety, especially for LGBTQQI students.

<sup>1</sup> See Russell, S.T., Kostroski, O., McGuire, J.K., Laub, C. and Manke, E. (2006). 2001-2002 California Healthy Kids Survey (CHKS) and the 2003, 2004, 2005 Preventing School Harassment Survey (PSH)LGBT Issues in the Curriculum Promotes School Safety. (California Safe Schools Coalition Research Brief No. 4). San Francisco, CA: California Safe Schools Coalition.

<sup>2</sup> and/or since some students may be (now or later) in a process of questioning their current sexual orientation and/or gender identity



# Parents' Influence on the Health of Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Teens: What Parents and Families Should Know

Source: National Center for HIV/AIDS, Viral Hepatitis, STD, and TB Prevention Division of Adolescent and School Health, November 2013

## Overview

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The teen years can be a challenging time for young people and their parents. This fact sheet provides information on how parents can promote positive health outcomes for their lesbian, gay, or bisexual (LGB) teen. The information is based on a review of published studies<sup>1</sup> which found that parents play an important role in shaping the health of their LGB teen.

When LGB teens share their sexual orientation<sup>2</sup> (or even if they choose not to share it), they may feel rejected by important people in their lives, including their parents. This rejection can negatively influence an LGB teen's overall well-being.

On the other hand, a positive family environment, with high levels of parental support and low levels of conflict, is associated with LGB youth who experience healthy emotional adjustment. These teens are less likely to engage in sexual risk behaviors and be involved in violence.

## How Parents Make a Difference

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Compared to heterosexual youth, LGB teens are more likely to experience bullying, physical violence, or rejection. As a result, LGB teens are at an increased risk for suicidal thoughts and behaviors and report higher rates of sexual risk behavior and substance abuse.

Research suggests that LGB teens experience better health outcomes when their parents support their sexual orientation in positive and affirming ways. Compared to teens who do not feel valued by their parents, LGB youth who feel valued by their parents are less likely to:

- Experience depression
- Attempt suicide
- Use drugs and alcohol
- Become infected with sexually transmitted diseases

In addition, research among young gay men has shown that having a positive relationship with their parents helped them decide to have safer sex (e.g., using a condom, not having sex with high-risk partners). Many also reported that having a positive parent-teen relationship created a sense of responsibility to avoid HIV infection.

<sup>1</sup> This fact sheet is based on the following publication: Bouris A., Guilamo-Ramos V, et al. A systematic review of parental influences on the health and well-being of lesbian, gay, and bisexual youth: Time for a new public health research and practice agenda. (2010). *Journal of Primary Prevention*; 31, 273–309. Because the systematic review focused on youth who identify as lesbian, gay, or bisexual and did not include research on gender identity, this fact sheet does not address transgender youth.

<sup>2</sup> Sexual orientation: a term frequently used to describe a person's romantic, emotional, or sexual attraction to another person.





## Specific Actions for Parents

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Research on parenting shows how important it is—regardless of their teen’s sexual orientation—for parents to:

- Have open, honest conversations with their teens about sex
- Know their teen’s friends and know what their teen is doing
- Develop common goals with their teen, including being healthy and doing well in school

Although additional research is needed to better understand the associations between parenting and the health of LGB youth, the following are research-based action steps parents can take to support the health and well-being of their LGB teen and decrease the chances that their teen will engage in risky behaviors.

### **Talk and listen.**

- Parents who talk with and listen to their teen in a way that invites an open discussion about sexual orientation can help their teen feel loved and supported.
- When their teen is ready, parents can brainstorm with him or her how to talk with others about the teen’s sexual orientation.
- Parents can talk with their teen about how to avoid risky behavior and unsafe or high-risk situations.
- Parents can talk with their teen about the consequences of bullying. Parents (and their teen) should report any physical or verbal abuse that occurs at school to teachers and the school principal.

### **Provide support.**

- Parents need to understand that teens find it very stressful to share their sexual orientation.
- Parents who take time to come to terms with how they feel about their teen’s sexual orientation will be more able to respond calmly and use respectful language.
- Parents should discuss with their teen how to practice safe, healthy behaviors.

### **Stay involved.**

- By continuing to include their teen in family events and activities, parents can help their teen feel supported.
- Parents can help their teen develop a plan for dealing with challenges, staying safe, and reducing risk.
- Parents who make an effort to know their teen’s friends and romantic partners and know what their teen is doing can help their teen stay safe and feel cared about.

### **Be proactive.**

- Parents who build positive relationships with their teen’s teachers and school personnel can help ensure a safe and welcoming learning environment.
- If parents think their teen is depressed or needs other mental health support, they should speak with a school counselor, social worker, psychologist, or other health professional.
- Parents can access many organizations and online information resources to learn more about how they can support their LGB teen, other family members, and their teen’s friends.
- Parents can help their teen find appropriate LGB organizations and go with their teen to events and activities that support LGB youth.



## More Information

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### **Centers for Disease Control and Prevention**

*Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Health*

[www.cdc.gov/lgbthealth/youth.htm](http://www.cdc.gov/lgbthealth/youth.htm)

*Parental Monitoring*

[www.cdc.gov/healthyyouth/adolescenthealth/monitoring.htm](http://www.cdc.gov/healthyyouth/adolescenthealth/monitoring.htm)

### **Advocates for Youth**

[www.advocatesforyouth.org/parents-sex-ed-center-home](http://www.advocatesforyouth.org/parents-sex-ed-center-home)

### **American Psychological Association**

[www.apa.org/topics/sexuality/orientation.aspx](http://www.apa.org/topics/sexuality/orientation.aspx)

### **Family Acceptance Project**

<http://familyproject.sfsu.edu>

### **Gender Spectrum Education and Training**

[www.genderspectrum.org](http://www.genderspectrum.org)

### **Parents, Families, and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG)**

[www.pflag.org](http://www.pflag.org)



# Understanding Children's Gender

www.genderspectrum.org

Gender is more complex than most of us have been taught. Gender is made up of three parts: (1) **gender biology** (our bodies or biological sex – our sex assigned at birth based on appearance of genitals), (2) **gender expression** (how we dress and act), and (3) **gender identity** (how we feel inside). For most kids, these three facets of gender line up and the kids are typically gendered boys or girls (**cisgender**). For other kids, however, these three facets of gender align differently; these kids are **gender-expansive**, which includes **transgender** kids.

Although our society teaches us that there are only two genders—male and female—**there are really many genders**. Not all children fit neatly into a male or female gender identity. For some children, the sense of being “both” or “neither” best describes their reality. Some of these kids speak of being more of one some days and more of the other on different days; these children might best be described as gender fluid. These are all normal variations in human gender and do not mean something is wrong with a child. A child's gender is not what others tell them, but who they know themselves to be.

Even though we as parents have great influence over our children, parents can't change a child's true gender identity or expressions of their gender. However, we can help our children to have a healthy, positive sense of themselves in relation to their gender.

## What do we mean by “Parenting and Family?”

When we talk about “family,” we are not referring only to people related by genetics. Families can come in all configurations, including adoptive or foster parents, grandparents, extended family, mentors, or one's chosen family made up of close friends. Many youth have been rejected by their genetic and adoptive families and need support from other adults. Similarly, “parenting” can be done by a variety of adults in a child's life, not just by legal parents or guardians. Thus our resources in this section, and in our work in general, are for all types of “family” and all adults who “parent” a child.

## General Parenting Considerations

Parents have a very powerful role to play in a gender-expansive youth's life. Research has shown that supportive parenting can significantly affect our children's positive outlook on their lives, their mental health and their self-esteem. On the other hand, rejecting parenting practices are directly correlated to gender-expansive and transgender youth being more depressed and suicidal. Research shows that the most crucial thing we as parents can do is to allow our children to be exactly who they are.

Every family is unique, with different family dynamics, as well as cultural, social, and religious influences. Some families have to consider their child's physical safety in their communities more than others, but all families have to weigh the effects of their parenting approach on their child's long-term psychological well-being.

## What are Affirming Parenting Practices?

Parenting practices that are based on affirming a child's own sense of gender strengthen a child's self-esteem and sense of self worth. While some of the parenting practices discussed in this section may be challenging for some parents to implement, it is important to take whatever steps you can to demonstrate to your child that you are with them on this journey.

**Create a supportive family environment:** The ability to make the home a sanctuary of security and support for your child is the single most important factor in promoting lifelong health and well-being for your child. Such an environment creates a buffer for your child from the hardships they may face outside of the home. Creating such a space may not come easily for you, particularly if you are struggling with accepting your child's gender identity or expression. If so, seek help from an empathetic, knowledgeable friend, family member, support group, therapist or other source of support.

**Require respect within the family:** With immediate and extended family, it is imperative that you require and accept only kindness and respect for your child.



While you may not be able to change people's opinions, you can certainly dictate how you expect others to behave and speak around you and your child. It can be scary to make this demand of family members, yet many parents report that once they've taken a stand on their child's behalf, they feel a great sense of relief and empowerment.

***Express love and support for your child's gender expression:*** What does this look like? It means allowing them to choose, without pressure or unspoken messages, the clothes they wish to wear, how and with whom they play, their favorite toys, the accessories they favor, the manner in which they wear their hair, and the decorations and images with which they surround themselves. It means helping them prepare for any negative reactions they may encounter outside the home by practicing their responses with them and making sure, when appropriate, that there is a safe adult for them to turn to in case they need assistance. It means discussing any negative or conflicting feelings you are struggling with over their gender identity or expression with other adults, not with your child.

***Allow zero tolerance for disrespect, negative comments or pressure:*** A concrete way to demonstrate ongoing support and acceptance for your child is to tolerate absolutely no negative comments about your child, from anyone, whether your child is with you or not. This means following up with the people who make such comments in a firm way that makes clear your commitment to your child's well-being. It may also mean needing to follow up with other parents or the school about the comments made by other parents or children.

***Maintain open and honest communication with your child:*** Stay open about this journey, both your child's, and your own. By demonstrating to them that you are a partner in this process, and showing a genuine sense of interest in how they see themselves, what they think, what they are experiencing, you show that you are there for them. This open level of communication will also help you evaluate your child's level of stress or distress, and whether they may need additional outside support or intervention.

### **What are Unaffirming Parenting Practices?**

When their authentic sense of self is not recognized and affirmed, it undermines a child's self-esteem and feelings of self-worth. It should not be surprising that

many children who end up in the foster care system, run away, or become homeless are gender-expansive and transgender; rejected at home, they find themselves with few options for support. Refusing to accept one's child as they are and behaving in an unkind, punitive, or disrespectful manner communicates to your child a lack of value or worth.

As you read the list of behaviors below, try to also have compassion toward yourself. Many parents have employed these practices at one time or another. What is important is to commit to communicate your love and support for your child from this point forward. We can only start from where we are.

***Physical or verbal abuse:*** One of the most damaging things you can do is verbally or physically abuse your child. It won't get your child to change, and it places him or her at a far greater risk of suicide. Even if you have the feelings internally, work to keep them there, rather than outwardly demonstrating your struggle to your child.

***Exclusion from family activities:*** The urge to avoid being embarrassed by your gender-expansive child may not seem blatant to you, but it sends a message of shame and implies core change is required in order to be a member of the family. Insisting your child "dress properly" or "act normally" makes your child feel that the comfort of others trumps their own sense of well-being and security.

***Blocking access to supportive friends or activities:*** Preventing your child from seeing gender-expansive friends and allies or participating in supportive activities will only generate a sense of isolation and significantly increase risk factors. Blocking your child's access not only cuts them off from a critical support system, it also stigmatizes other people like your child.

***Blaming the child for the discrimination they face:*** Saying that a child deserves any mistreatment that they encounter simply for being who they are is incredibly dangerous, an implicit message that they are to blame for the cruelty of others.

***Denigration and ridicule:*** When you speak or treat your child with disrespect, or allow others to, it shows them that they cannot count on you for the love and protection they desperately need.

***Religious or faith-based condemnation:*** Telling a child that God will punish them greatly increases health and mental health risks, and can remove a vital



source of solace.

**Distress, denial, and shame:** When a child sees that they are causing you great distress and shame, they internalize this pressure. It is damaging to openly communicate your denial of their gender identity or expression.

**Silence and secrecy:** Insisting your child remain silent about their gender identity or expression tells them that there is something inherently wrong with them. If you are keeping your child's gender identity or expression a secret because you are worried about his or her safety, think about ways you can balance safety concerns while at the same time show support (see Safety Considerations below).

**Pressure to enforce gender conformity:** Even when parents are motivated by a desire to protect their children, asking them to mask who they are sends the harmful message that there is something fundamentally wrong with them.

### How Do I Know if This is Just a Phase?

For some children, expressing gender-expansiveness may be a phase; for others, it is not. Only time will tell. We suggest using the concept of insistence, consistence and persistence to help determine if a child is truly gender-expansive or transgender.

### Young Children

If your child has identified as the opposite gender since early childhood, it is unlikely they will change their mind. Most people have some sense of their gender identity **between the ages of two and four years old**. For most, this awareness remains stable over time. For example, a 12-year-old child who was assigned a male gender at birth, but has consistently asserted "I am a girl" since the age of three, will most likely remain transgender throughout life.

There are cases when a young child who strongly identifies with the opposite gender does not change their mind. The most common time for this to occur is about 9-10 years old. There is insufficient research to know if these children later identify as gender-expansive or transgender adults. So, it is unclear if this change indicates that the child has learned to hide their true self, or if it was indeed just a childhood phase.

### Teens

Another typical time for gender identity to come into question is at puberty. Many teens who have never exhibited anything outside the norm in their gender expression or identity, start feeling differently as puberty approaches. This can be very confusing for parents who "didn't see this coming." Since adolescence is a time of exploration and change in general, it can be hard for parents to know if this is just a teenage phase, or whether their child is "really" gender-expansive or transgender. Again, look to the concept of insistence, consistence and persistence to determine if a child is truly gender-expansive or transgender. This may mean you won't have an answer for quite a long time.

Though these are two common times for gender identity to come up for children, they are certainly not the only times. A child at any age, even to adulthood, can start feeling differently about his or her gender identity or expression.

### What About My Feelings?

Parents have a variety of responses to their gender-expansive or transgender children, and none of them are "right" or "wrong." Feelings of embarrassment, denial, anger, fear, doubt, grief, and worry are normal, as are feelings of acceptance, understanding, support, pride and joy. Many parents feel a combination of positive and negative feelings. This is a hard road for parents, and even though we may not have chosen this for our child or ourselves, it is our road to navigate. You are not alone in your feelings or in your experience of raising a gender-expansive child. It can be very helpful and comforting to seek support from other parents or from a mental health professional.

### Feelings of Guilt

It is common for parents to blame themselves when a child falls outside of gender norms. They ask themselves, "Is it my fault somehow?" "Where did I go wrong?" Mothers may feel they were too permissive. Fathers may be angry and refuse to accept their gender-expansive child, especially if this child was born a boy.

Current research supports the theory that gender is "hard-wired" in the brain from birth. Gender diversity is not an illness or a result of poor parenting. It is not the result of divorce or an indication of child abuse. Gender diversity is not caused by liberal or permissive parenting, or by a parent who secretly wished her or his



child were the ‘opposite’ sex. It is normal. You did not cause this or do anything wrong.

### Feelings of Loss

Another common feeling is that of loss. Families, parents, and siblings may feel a sense of grief at the idea they are “losing” their son or daughter, their brother or sister. Even though the child is alive and well, a socially recognized gender change can elicit strong feelings of losing the person we thought we knew. We may experience periods of sadness, anger, and mourning as we (and/or our other children) come to terms with our child’s authentic identity.

### Living with Uncertainty

One of the biggest challenges to raising gender-expansive kids is learning to live with uncertainty. When a child is not clearly identifying as male or female, even parents who want to be supportive can find themselves thinking, “(j)ust decide already, one way or another!” A lack of consistency in their child’s gender expression can leave parents wondering just who their child “really” is. Parents feel more empowered to help their child if they know where their child will end up.

Gender identity is not always “one or the other.” We need to recognize that not every child is on the path to choosing a male or female gender identity. Many children (and adults) feel like they are both genders, neither gender, or go back and forth. They have already arrived at their final destination, which is a space outside typical gender constructs. Or, they may still be figuring it out. We won’t know until our child knows and can communicate this to us, and that may take many years. It is important for us to follow their lead. Let your child lead you and figure it out at his or her own pace.

Finding language that works for your child and yourself can be a big help in dealing with uncertainty. With older children, this can mean discussing together how they would like for you to refer to them, both directly as well as when you are speaking with others. Some families take the approach of working around pronouns by just using the child’s name. Others use **gender neutral pronouns such as “they” or “ze.”** Developing stock responses that don’t include male or female pronouns can also be helpful: “My kid is just being his or her true self!”

## Examining Our Own Gender Stories

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Everyone has a gender story, including us parents. All people in our society have been affected by gender norms, either positively or negatively, in their lives. If we make our gender stories part of our family conversations, then gender identity and expression becomes about all of us, not just about the one child who is “different.”

Gender norms and expectations are different now than when we were growing up and will continue to change. Many teens and young adults today **define their genders in ways we didn’t even know existed.** It is important for parents to accept this new frontier of gender identity and gender expression and to take the time to think about how our children’s experiences relate to our own experiences growing up. What assumptions do we make about gender based on how we were raised and the messages we received? Are these the only way to think about gender? How have gender norms affected us in ways we do or don’t want them to affect our kids? These exercises will help us in understanding our child’s gender story, as well as our own, which can only help us be better parents.

## Supporting All of the Children in the Family

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Sometimes the gender diversity of a family member can create a sense of perpetual crisis in a family. Because of society’s discomfort with gender diversity, we may unconsciously bond with our cisgender children more than our gender-expansive child. By doing this, we may inadvertently place siblings in a position of choosing loyalties to us or to the gender-expansive sibling. Alternately, we may focus on the exceptional needs of a gender-expansive child, overlooking the sibling as a result.

A sibling may act out in an effort to gain our attention, possibly in ways that are hurtful to their gender-expansive sibling. For example, the sibling may “out” or disclose personal information about the gender-expansive sibling at inappropriate times or in a disrespectful manner.

Gender diverse children may be teased and bullied, even by their siblings. Siblings may participate because they feel pressure from their peers to ostracize or be critical of their gender-expansive sibling. On the other hand, siblings often feel obliged to defend their gender-



expansive sibling from bullying by others. Siblings may be teased and bullied themselves.

One strategy to avoid the division between gender-expansive kids and their siblings is to make sure we discuss gender as it relates to all people (see Examining Our Own Gender Stories above). This not only avoids treating gender-expansive children as if they are the “problem,” but also helps support siblings in their experiences as well.

### Talking with Extended Family and Friends

It can be nerve-wracking and scary to bring up the topic of our child’s gender with family and friends. Even if our closest friends and immediate family members are aware of our child’s gender expression and identity, it may be hard to see people that didn’t previously know about our child’s gender, and may not be supportive.

There is not just one way to deal with this situation, of course, as every family and group of friends are different. Remember that family members and friends are at different places in their understanding of gender identity and gender expression; recognize that while we’ve had some time to think about this (and think about it, and think about it...), this may be completely new to them, as it was to us at some point in time. They also aren’t around our children as much as we are, and may not see what we see in our kids.

One strategy is to call or write to family and friends before seeing them. Let them know about your child’s gender and that you are fully supportive of your child. Of course, it’s natural for them to have questions; let them know they are welcome to ask you anything in private, but they should not talk about it in front of your child. Let them know that regardless of their personal feelings about your child’s gender and/or your parenting choices, that you expect them to be kind and respectful to your child. We have collected some **sample letters that parents/caregivers have sent to family members and friends to assist you in this communication.**

Spend some time identifying your expectations, then be very explicit about what you are requesting of them. For example, you’d like them to use your child’s preferred pronoun and name; you’d like them to avoid negative comments about hair, clothes, toys, etc. If presents are being exchanged, you’d like them to give what your child actually wants to play with and not

what they think your child should play with.

Remind your family and friends that your child is more than just gender and they should see and relate to your whole child. If they are nervous, tell them what your child’s current interests are so they will have some safe topics to discuss. Direct them to the Gender Spectrum website, or offer some articles or books for them to read so they can learn more about gender-expansive kids. **The Transgender Child** is a good primer on the topic. **Share articles that explain gender** and kids so you don’t have to be the expert.

The more you learn to speak with confidence and pride about your child, the easier it will be for others to accept your child and your parenting. People look to you for their lead on how to respond or react to your child. You have nothing to apologize or be ashamed about. Remember, it’s your job to take care of your child, not the needs of other adults. A desire to help other people feel comfortable is natural. Yet if you find yourself doing so by denying or dismissing your child’s authentic self, it can be quite hurtful. For example, if an acquaintance or new person you meet asks about your dress-wearing boy, rather than making comments such as, “Oh yes, that is my son. He’s just pretending to be a princess today,” consider simply saying, “Yes, that’s my son,” or even “Isn’t it great that he’s not afraid to be himself.” Your priority is your child’s well-being.

### Privacy Considerations

Raising gender-expansive and transgender kids comes with constant decisions about when and how to share information. Each situation and are different. Some kids are completely open and tell everyone they meet about their gender, while others don’t ever want to mention the word “gender.” Some gender-expansive and transgender kids conform to societal norms of gender expression, while others are so clearly a combination of genders, that there is no option of being private.

Are you obligated to disclose if your child is going on a playdate? Sleeping over at a friend’s house? Going to a school dance? A school overnight trip? In fact, there are no rules about when you must share information about your child. What type of body your child has is no one else’s business. Other people don’t have to tell us what’s in their child’s pants, why do we have to tell them what’s in our child’s pants?

The only considerations we need to think about are



what's best for our child in each situation.

Remember that once you share your child's gender information, you can't un-share it. Even if children are OK with being open when they are little, their needs around privacy may change as they grow older.

For additional info on **privacy considerations**, we encourage you to visit our **Resources section**.

## **Safety Considerations**

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Children not fitting into typical gender boxes are often the victims of mistreatment or even violence. Caregivers to gender-expansive children bear a burden to ensure the physical and emotional safety of these kids in the face of that general reality.

Our role as parents is to love and accept our children, and we will help them learn how to deal with a world that sometimes doesn't understand them. Without alarming them, we can help prepare our children for unwanted questions or comments by helping them come up with respectful replies that maintain their boundaries; this way, they won't be left on their own to come up with a response on the spot.

We also need to teach our children how to access the support they need if it feels like things are becoming unsafe. We each know our own communities best, so we each need to decide if our children are in physical danger by expressing their gender in public, and weigh this physical danger against the emotional harm of not allowing our children to be their true selves outside of the home.

This can be tricky territory—our own discomfort, as well as a desire to protect our children, may lead us to decide to allow one set of behaviors in the home and another outside of the home. But there is a cost to this choice: to your child's sense of self, and potentially his or her experience of your support and acceptance.

There are a number of **safety considerations** for you to consider – remembering to place your children's needs at the forefront of your decision-making process is the first step to protecting them.

## **Transitioning**

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When a person changes outwardly from one gender to another and lives in accordance with that gender identity, it is called going through **transition**, or transitioning. Transition can occur in two ways: social transition through non-permanent changes

in clothing, hairstyle, name and/or pronouns; and medical transition through the use of medicines and/or surgeries to promote gender-based body changes.

There is no rule of thumb for when a transgender child should be allowed to transition socially and/or medically. There usually comes a time when your children's discomfort or suffering is so obvious that despite your concerns, it is critical for them to live in the world as they choose. But how do you know when that is? How long after they tell you about their desire should you wait to allow them this form of expression?

In making this decision, two concerns typically rise to the surface: "Will my child be safe if I let him or her do this?" and "Wouldn't it be better just to wait?" The most useful way to answer these questions is to first evaluate whether a child feels safe and satisfied or if that child is instead suffering. If your child is suffering, it is important to weigh the potential dangers involved in transitioning, compared to the dangers associated with their current depression. What is clear is that children who receive the support of their families have the best outcomes in terms of their future health and well-being.

## **Navigating Religious Communities**

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Depending on the religion or religious community, acceptance of gender diversity can vary tremendously. It can be helpful to take stock of your religious community's influences. List the overt messages and messengers about **gender and sexual orientation** issues, as well as how LGBT people tend to be characterized. You might be able to identify people who you perceive as "safe." Approach these members first about your situation and seek their counsel on how to approach others.

It is also important to remember that gender diversity cuts across all racial, cultural and religious lines. With sensitive exploration, you may find people in your religious community who are more tolerant than others. Some people find **they can educate their present religious community about gender**. Other families find they need to seek new religious communities that are more welcoming of their family. In the process of supporting your child, you may well lose important people in your life, but more than likely you will also gain some important new people to replace them.





## School Considerations

### Choosing a School or College

Choosing a school or college with our kids is an important decision. Talk to the administrators or admissions staff about gender diversity to determine if the school will be a good fit for your child. For a more in-depth assessment on **choosing a school or college**, please visit our **Resources section**.

### Working with the School

Forming a positive relationship with school administrators and staff, whether you are new to a school or returning, is vital to the safety and success of your gender-expansive child. You will need to be proactive. You cannot assume that schools with general anti-bullying policies will be responsive to the needs of your child. Be sure to approach the school as partners, not as adversaries. Assume they have positive intentions; the vast majority of educators are interested in the well-being of the students and families they serve. However, most have little or no training about working with gender-expansive children. It may be that you will need to help them by providing resources, materials, and examples of other schools that have successfully met the needs of gender-expansive students.

Most schools have written or unwritten aspirations around inclusion and diversity; bring these into your discussions to show you want what is best for the whole school community. You may be hopefully working with these teachers and administrators for many years, and not only around issues of gender, so the goal is to forge a positive collaboration. You can use our outline, “**Initial School Meeting**,” as a guide.

Even before your child starts at a school, you can start preparing. Many schools do professional development during the few weeks before school starts. Ask for gender training to be included in this professional development, so teachers feel prepared to deal with your gender-expansive or transgender child. Even if you are the first family at the school with a gender-expansive child, you certainly won't be the last. Point out that it is in the best interest of all of the students, not just your student, for the staff to be trained, as gender affects every child and the school wants to create a gender-inclusive environment. The good news is that resources exist to help educate schools, including our own **Gender Spectrum Trainings**.

### Safety in School

It is well documented that a safe environment optimizes a child's ability to learn. Children cannot effectively learn when they live in fear of discrimination. All children, including gender-expansive and transgender children, deserve a safe school environment, free from bullying, teasing and violence, and it is the school's legal responsibility to maintain that environment. Your child's gender identity or gender expression in no way excuses mistreatment by other students, staff or parents. While it is important to work in partnership with the school, your child's physical safety and emotional well-being are non-negotiable. School districts and individual school administrators can be held liable under various federal, state and local laws for failing to protect students from harassment based on gender identity. From the beginning, if you believe your child is being mistreated based on gender, document those concerns and share them with the school leader. Make it clear that while you wish to work with the school, you will take whatever steps necessary to keep your child safe.

If you've tried to work with the school personnel and they are unresponsive or unreasonable, you may need legal advice (see Legal Considerations).

### Bullying in School

Bullying is a serious problem for any student. Most schools recognize this fact, and many are adopting programs and policies to create environments that do not allow or tolerate bullying. Bullying can take the form of one or more students directly teasing, taunting, or threatening another. Bullying comes in other, more indirect forms as well. A student may experience intentional social isolation perpetrated by his or her peers, and sometimes even reinforced by teachers and/or the administration.

Often, bullying is related to gender expression, even if on the surface it appears to be motivated by something else. For instance, a boy may be taunted as “gay,” not because he is in fact gay, but because his gender expression falls outside the society's norms of masculinity. Your school may not specifically name gender expression or gender identity as reasons for bullying, but it does not mean that school personnel will not respond proactively. Further education about gender diversity is often needed for teachers and school administrators to respond most effectively.



## Other School Issues

Along with a child's general safety and well-being, there are several specific areas that will require your attention. These include: how your child will be referred to (name and pronouns) and listed on school records; how your child's privacy will be protected; bathroom and locker room usage aligned with your child's gender identity; participation in overnight trips, sports, or clubs.

As students get older, they must navigate school dances, crushes, and gossip. Help your child be prepared by talking about these situations ahead of time.

Our "Gender Support Plan" is a great tool to help you in these discussions with your school. This resource, as well as many others, can be found in the Resources section.

## Camps, Sports Leagues, and Other Out-of-School Activities

Many of the same situations that arise in school situations arise in out-of-school activities as well, such as privacy considerations, restrooms and locker rooms, and overnight sleeping arrangements.

Just as with schools, most adults who run these activities have no experience with gender-expansive or transgender kids. Sometimes, camp or outside activities are opportunities for gender-expansive kids to see what it is like to present as the opposite gender, if they are not already doing so at home and at school.

Depending upon what documentation you need to register your child, you can think about registering his or her preferred gender. If you don't have documentation, look into obtaining a state I.D. to use instead of a birth certificate, as in some states it is much easier to change a gender marker in the state system than it is on a birth certificate.

Some families choose to be completely open with camps and activities about their child's gender and some don't share any information at all. Another approach is to tell only the camp leader(s) and ask them not to disclose this private information to staff or campers. If you do choose to share your child's gender information, take the same approach with camp staff and coaches as with schools—assume positive intent and choose to educate camp or sports staff. Proactively speak with the camp leaders about potential issues before they arise, and ask if they are willing to have

their staff receive gender training.

## Medical Considerations

### Changing Bodies to Match Gender Identity

Gender-expansive and transgender kids do not have to change their bodies in order to change their gender expression or identity. Some choose to make no changes to their bodies at all, while others know that they must change their bodies to feel complete. One of our roles as parents is to help our children figure out what road is right for them.

Keep the lines of communication open and **explore options together**.

Discussing what you learn together can work to make the whole family better informed as well as allow for ample adjustment time. However, keep in mind that a parent and child may have very different ideas of an appropriate timetable. Don't feel rushed into making decisions about permanent changes, but also keep in mind that your child may feel rejected by you if these critical life decisions are delayed indefinitely.

### Children's Emotions Around Medical Care

For many kids, going to the doctor can be traumatic. For gender-expansive or transgender kids, physical examinations of their bodies can feel especially invasive because it forces them to face a body they want to be different. Or, it can feel hard to explain their gender expression to a doctor who doesn't understand.

### Choosing Medical Professionals

It is important to find medical professionals who understand children and gender, or who are at least willing to educate themselves. Interview potential medical providers and find out about their experience in working with gender-expansive or transgender children. **Ask about how they see their role in your child's gender journey**, and make sure they won't be another adult trying to put your child into a gender box.

If your child is going down the road of physical transition, you don't have to only work with an endocrinologist. Any physician, including your pediatrician or family practitioner, can help a child starting physical transition with hormone "blockers" and/or cross-hormones.

If no one in your area is qualified, try to find someone who is willing to learn. We can help connect them to experienced physicians who can consult with them about the process. Unfortunately, many



physicians are intimidated by this relatively new area of practice, or disagree with treating transgender children. Sometimes, families end up having to travel to established gender clinics in order to receive treatment for their child.

As with any relationship with a medical professional, it is important to be an active participant in your child's care and monitor the physician-client relationship on an ongoing basis.

Need some help finding a medical professional? Gender Spectrum has connections to many professionals who are committed to affirmative care and support of gender diverse youth. If you need referrals for medical, mental health, legal or educational support, contact us at [www.genderspectrum.org](http://www.genderspectrum.org) and we will connect you to professionals who can help you find appropriate referrals.

## **Mental Health Considerations**

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### **Should We Seek Mental Health Support?**

Children who fall outside of typical gender norms don't automatically need to see a therapist. Gender diversity is not a mental illness that needs to be treated. Transgender children who are generally content and functioning like most other children their age don't need to be in therapy. On the other hand, children who are depressed, anxious, or distressed due to their experience of their gender or due to other people's reactions to their gender, may need extra support.

Raising a gender-expansive child is complicated in a world that doesn't yet understand gender diversity. The constant decisions—large and small—we need to make can be exhausting. Should my child wear that outfit to school? Should I tell this person before we get together? Should I correct people if they assume my child is a different gender than they identify with? Will my child be safe and supported at school? The pressure to be an expert on gender and kids can feel overwhelming. Because of this, oftentimes parents will seek therapy for themselves in order to gain some support around parenting issues related to their child's gender.

Whether you seek professional help or not, it is important to keep the lines of communication open between you and your child around gender issues. Talk about your own experiences with gender norms so your child understands that everyone has a gender story, not just gender-expansive people. If it's not already part of your pattern, try to raise the issue of gender with your

child occasionally so that your child doesn't think it's a forbidden or uncomfortable topic for you to discuss. Point out and appreciate gender diversity in other kids or adults so your child understands that there is a variety of gender identities and expressions, not just two. Most of all, it's important for gender-expansive children to know that if they are teased or questioned excessively about their gender that it is not because there is anything wrong with them, but instead it is because other people don't understand that there are other ways to be boys, girls, both or neither.

### **How Do U Choose a Mental Health Provider?**

Once you have determined that you will seek a therapist's support, you must then identify a professional who will be most appropriate for the needs of your child and family. By no means are all therapists well informed on issues of gender as they relate to children and youth. As you seek the services of professionals, ask them what their experience is working with transgender or gender-expansive youth. A bad therapist can do more harm than good.

If you cannot find a qualified therapist in your area, consider finding someone you are comfortable with and who is open to learning; that person can then consult with another therapist who has experience around issues related to gender and youth. Contact us for more information at [www.genderspectrum.org](http://www.genderspectrum.org).

Ongoing monitoring of the therapy relationship is important. If the therapist is for your child, keep the lines of communication open between you and your child, as well as between you and the therapist. You want to make sure the environment remains supportive and affirming for your child.

Need some help finding a mental health professional? Gender Spectrum has connections to many professionals who are committed to affirmative care and support of gender diverse youth. If you need referrals for medical, mental health, legal or educational support, contact us and we will connect you to professionals who can help you find appropriate referrals.

## **Legal Considerations**

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### **Deciding Whether to Seek Legal Help**

Parents of gender-expansive or transgender kids may have some legal considerations to contend with, such as identity documents, health insurance, discrimination, and custody. Many of the legal issues faced by parents with gender-expansive children can



be resolved through education and training.

*Discrimination:* Keep in mind that most institutions have little or no experience responding to gender-expansive or transgender kids. Rather than anything malicious, they may simply be unaware of the challenges being faced by your child, and don't know how to respond more effectively. Sometimes the easiest and most efficient way to garner the support you seek is to approach the individuals involved directly, armed with the most up-to-date information and laws. If you can't resolve the issues, you may want to consider seeking legal advice.

*Identity Documents:* What name should I use to register my child for school? What if I am asked to provide legal documentation that does not match my child's gender expression? Should I legally change my child's name and/or gender? While legal name changes give parents a great deal of leverage to ensure children are referred to consistent with their gender identity, some parents are not able or ready to take this step. Many have found it helpful to approach the school, program, agency or organization in which their child is involved and simply request that their child be referred to by a preferred name. There are no laws preventing schools and other organizations from calling children by their chosen name. Much of the time all it takes is a little education to help them understand that it is the right thing to do.

*Custody Issues:* Many lawyers and judges have no experience with the issues related to gender and children. If your child lives in two households and you are experiencing disagreement about your child's gender status and what is best for your child, obtain therapy and/or mediation as your first steps. Try to reach an understanding outside of the courtroom about how to proceed with parenting your child. This may mean having to make compromises, especially if your child is young; though perhaps not ideal, is likely preferable to going to court and facing a potentially negative outcome.

If your family is already in the family courts system, you should immediately seek the counsel of an attorney familiar with issues and rights related to gender-expansive and transgender identities. It is also advisable to secure the professional support of doctors and therapists who can speak to the court about gender-expansive and transgender children and what they think is in the best interest of your child with

regard to gender expression.

### **Choosing a Legal Provider**

If you are in a situation where you need an attorney, especially for a family law case, it is imperative that you find one who has experience in dealing with gender-expansive or transgender children. There is too much at stake in custody cases to take unjustified risks or an unwise approach to a case based on inexperience. Gender Spectrum can connect you to experienced attorneys who can provide advice to you and/or your attorney around the issues of gender.

Need some help finding an attorney? Gender Spectrum works closely with the National Center for Lesbian Rights, the ACLU, and the Transgender Law Center, as well as other legal advocates who are committed to support of gender diverse youth. If you need referrals for legal support, contact us and we will connect you to professionals who can help you find appropriate referrals.





