

Top 10 Parent Questions and Concerns Regarding Speaking about Gender Variations with Children

1. *Why should my child learn about this at school?*

School is a place where children are taught to respect one another and to learn to work together. Beyond this fundamental concept, schools are legally responsible for the safety and well-being of their students. In California, AB537, the California Student Safety and Violence Prevention Act of 2000, changed California's Education Code by adding actual or perceived gender identity to the existing nondiscrimination policy. Districts and individual administrators can be financially liable for damages in circumstances where they do not take steps to insure a student's safety when being harassed because of their real or perceived gender. Quite simply, it is the law.

Creating a more tolerant, inclusive, and accepting school environment teaches children to recognize and resist stereotypes. We teach children to stand up for others, to resist bullying, and to work together. Learning about gender and the gender spectrum is part of that work. Gender variant and transgender people are still an often oppressed minority group that deserves protection and understanding. Statistics reveal the devastating impact these young people face when placed into a non-supportive or hostile setting.

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

2. *If you tell kids about transgender people, aren't you discussing sexuality?*

The simple answer is no. When we discuss gender, we discuss bodies, what people like to wear, how they present themselves, and the activities they engage in, not sexuality. Sexuality involves physical intimacy and attraction. Gender is about self-identity. Gender identity is a person's internal sense of where they fit on the gender spectrum. Current research suggests that gender identity is determined in-utero. When we discuss transgender people, we address the incongruence they may experience with their bodies, not issues related to intimacy.

3. *Won't my child get confused if we speak about more than two gender options?*

Studies show that, with enough information, children of any age are able to understand that there are more than the two gender categories currently recognized by our society. When it is explained to them in a simple, age appropriate manner, gender variance is an easy concept for children to grasp. As adults, we struggle to separate the ideas of gender and sexuality primarily because we were taught that they are one and the same. Children have an ability to grasp the complexity of gender variance because sexuality does not factor in to complicate their understanding.

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

4. *Isn't my child too young for this?*

Typically, children have a strong sense of their own gender identity by three or four years old. This means that gender variant children or children with transgender identities may be displaying signs of this variance as young as preschool age. Children who are gender variant are often limited by current language and sometimes cannot accurately verbalize what they are feeling until they are much older.

Although exact numbers are not known, significant gender variance or a transgender identity occurs in as many as one of every 500 births. This is more common than childhood diabetes! Not all of these children will grow up to be transgender. Some will. By encouraging an overly simplistic categorization of gender, we unknowingly create stigmas and biases towards the people who naturally defy this categorization. Most gender variant and transgender children experience a tremendous amount of shame, teasing, and rejection for simply being themselves.

No child is too young to grasp the natural fluidity of gender. By using more encompassing, inclusive, and age appropriate language, we make room for self-expression and peer acceptance. If a child has been taught that only girls wear dresses, then that child may be confused to see a boy wearing a dress. This confusion may cause that child to tease and bully a gender variant child. On the other hand, if a child has been taught that all clothing is open for individual choice, then the same dress-wearing boy gains a sense of acceptance, autonomy, and self-expression. It comes down to the simple agreement that we want respect for all people.

5. *Aren't transgender people products of abuse, neglect, divorce, detached/over-involved parents?*

No. While it is true that some transgender and gender non-conforming people do experience a tremendous amount of societal abuse and parental rejection, this is not the source of their gender identity or variance. It is a response to their gender variance originating from societal sexism and homophobia. This abuse and rejection can, however, contribute greatly to poor self-esteem and hinder future access to things that non-gender variant people might take for granted, such as employment opportunities, housing, medical care, and basic legal rights.

6. *Won't discussing this encourage my child to be transgender?*

Being transgender is not something that a person chooses. Studies show that although parents cannot make their child gay or transgender, they can deeply influence how their child feels about themselves. Parental pressure to enforce gender conformity can damage a child's self esteem and is a high predictor of risk for youth suicide. Transgender youth currently have an extremely high attempted suicide rate: some estimate it being as high as 50%.

Note: It is sometimes helpful to substitute 'gender' or 'transgender' with another category of diversity such as ethnicity or religion and see if you still have the same concerns.

7. *Won't allowing my child to express a non-traditional gender cause them to be teased or harassed?*

Perhaps we should instead ask whether it is worth perpetuating stereotypes and limitations of self-expression to prevent possible teasing. What values do you wish to teach your child? Perhaps teaching about stereotypes and implementing self-esteem building principles might a more effective approach to concerns about teasing.

8. *If transgender people are so 'normal', why are some families so private about it?*

A family with a transgender child will decide together how much they wish to share with others. Many children prefer to live their lives as the gender that reflects their internal gender identity and not adhere to what society expects based on their anatomy. In other words, a child who lets her parents know that she is a girl, even though anatomically she is 'male,' may choose to live her life as a female.

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

9. *How can I correct or modify the impression I have already given my child about gender?*

It is powerful to share with children when we don't know the answer to something, and to let them know that adults as well as children are always learning. Having conversations with your children that reflect your growing understanding is wonderful. It does not undermine your parenting. If you were to discover that you had unknowingly taught your child another form of bigotry, you would correct the impression you had mistakenly given them. This is no different. Gender fluidity is something that both society and science are just beginning to explore and understand.

Many parents have approached us in workshops lamenting that they thought they'd done the right thing by saying "There is no difference between a girl and a boy. The only difference is that girls have one set of genitals and boys have another." It is wonderful to have begun the process of undoing sexist stereotypes. Consider opening such a conversation with, "I realize that I may not have told you about something that I am learning about. Did you know that not all people are the same...?"

10. *I don't really feel like I know how to answer my child's questions.*

Once again, explain that you are learning about this, too. It is important, however, to monitor and understand your own feelings before you initiate this kind of conversation. Children can pick up on your feelings towards a subject. So, if you are still feeling uncomfortable about the concept of gender variance, then consider taking additional time to increase your understanding. Read, talk to others, and further educate yourself. When you have a greater understanding and increased awareness, then you will likely feel more confident to talk with your children.

Some parents have responses such as, "Hmmm, I am just learning about that myself. Let me tell you what I know, and then if you would like to learn more, maybe we could do that together."

Answer children's questions simply. Most children are satisfied with this approach. They will guide the conversation from there and rarely ask the complex questions that occur to adults. You may be surprised at how simply children navigate this terrain.

Gender Spectrum Education and Training

Gender Spectrum provides education, resources and training to help institutions create a more gender sensitive and supportive environment for all people, including gender variant and transgender children and youth. Our services include

- School trainings (leadership, staff, parents and students)
- School district policy and curriculum consultations
- Individual teacher coaching and support
- Family support programs and consultations
- Medical and mental health provider trainings
- Annual Family Conference

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