

Supporting Your Child in their Gender Identity and/Exploration A Guide for Families

What is gender identity?

Gender identity is an individual's inner concept of self, which can be male, female, both, neither, or something else. Sometimes a child's gender identity matches the sex assigned to them at birth and sometimes it doesn't. For example, some children assigned male at birth have an inner concept of self as female, and some children assigned female at birth have an inner concept of self as male. Some youth express that their gender is fluid and changes over time, whereas other youth feel that it stays the same. Some children are still in the process of identifying their gender and what feels right for them. We'll use the term gender expansive to describe children who identify with (or are exploring) a gender other than the one assigned to them at birth.

What do we know about supporting youth?

Parents and other family members have such an important and influential role in their gender expansive child's life. Research has shown that when families are affirming and accepting of their child's gender identity, this support can impact their child's mental health in very positive ways. On the other hand, research suggests that when families are not affirming and accepting, this lack of support can lead to their child having low self-esteem, feeling anxious or depressed, or struggling with suicidality. All children grow best when they feel safe, supported, and confident to be themselves. It's important that family members are affirming of their child's gender identity in order to make them feel this way and reinforce their gender health

How families can be affirming & accepting of their child's gender identity:

Each family can find individualized ways to support their child that are consistent with their family values. Use these *Dos & Don'ts* as a general guide, and adjust to fit your family and **keep your child safe** in your community

Do:

- Express to your child that you love them
- Create an family environment where your child feels safe to express their gender openly
- Respect each family member's gender
- Openly communicate with your child
- Listen to your child when they are telling you something about their gender
- Help your child explore their gender if they express some uncertainty
- Call your child by their chosen name
- Use the gender pronouns that feel most comfortable for your child
- Allow your child to connect with gender expansive peers and supportive organizations
- Be a gender advocate for your child in the community, as long as it is safe
- Ensure that your child has gender-affirming medical providers
- Tell other important people (e.g., extended family, teachers) about your child's gender if this is safe and your child agrees
- Find your own support to help you be a strong parent (parents groups, organizations, etc.)
- Consider your culture and environment as you decide how to best support your child

- Consult with a gender knowledgeable therapist for guidance for your child and family

Don't:

- Shame or punish your child about their gender
- Tell your child that their gender identity or behaviors, clothing and style are wrong, even if they may cause others distress
- Pressure your child to behave in ways that aren't consistent with their unique gender identity & expression (e.g., clothing, activities, etc.)
- Tell your child they must live up to what other people expect from them about gender
- Tell your child that they can't talk about their gender and must keep it a secret (as long as it is safe)
- Pressure your child to "make up their mind" or be certain of their gender identity if they are in a process of exploration
- Prevent your child from having gender expansive friends or taking part in gender expansive organizations
- Counsel your child that if someone bullies them about their gender, it's their own fault for looking or acting the way they do
- Allow or fail to intervene when others treat your child disrespectfully because of their gender

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