



## A FEW DEFINITIONS TO HELP UNDERSTAND GENDER AND SEXUAL ORIENTATION FOR EDUCATORS AND PARENTS/GUARDIANS

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Often we are uncomfortable talking about something when we are not sure what words mean. Language particularly around gender, gender identity and expression shifts over time. This listing is a start to help you feel more comfortable and clear about some of the terms. These definitions are geared toward adults. They are longer and more detailed than ones you would use with students. One point to note is that biological sex, sexual orientation, and gender—gender identity and gender expression, are related, yet independent of one another

### A FEW KEY TERMS

**GENDER:** Refers to the socially constructed roles, behaviors, activities, and attributes that a given society considers appropriate for men and women. Gender varies between cultures and over time. There is broad variation in which individuals experience and express gender.

**GENDER BINARY:** The idea that there are only two distinct and very different genders. Female/Male.

**GENDER CONTINUUM / SPECTRUM:** The idea that gender is a continuum with many ways to express oneself as a person.

**GENDER EXPRESSION:** How one expresses themselves to the world. We express our gender through our clothes, hairstyle, mannerisms, speech patterns, body language, social interactions, or choice of activities. People express their gender along a continuum from feminine to masculine.

**GENDER IDENTITY:** How one feels inside. One's internal, deeply felt sense of being girl/woman, boy/man, somewhere in between, or outside these categories.

**SEX:** One's biological and physical attributes – external genitalia, sex chromosomes, hormones, and internal reproductive structures that are used to assign a sex at birth (female/male/intersex). Also referred to as biological sex, anatomical sex or assigned birth sex.

**SEXUAL ORIENTATION:** Who you are attracted to – physically, romantically, or emotionally. Current research indicates that sexual orientation exists along a continuum of emotional and sexual attractions. This continuum ranges from people who are only attracted to those of another sex (heterosexual or straight), the same sex (lesbian or gay), either sex (bisexual), and those who are not attracted to other individuals (asexual.)

### GENDER RELATED TERMS

**AFFIRMED MALE / TRANSBOY / TRANS MAN:** A person who was born anatomically female but has a male gender identity and expression.

**AFFIRMED FEMALE / TRANSGIRL / TRANS WOMAN:** A person who was born anatomically male but has a female gender identity and expression.

**CISGENDER:** Refers to people whose assigned birth sex corresponds to their internal sense of gender identity.

**GENDER DYSPHORIA:** Emotional distress over one's gender. A term in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders 5 (DSM-5) of the American Psychiatric Association. A marked incongruence between one's experienced/expressed gender and assigned gender, of at least 6 months duration and the condition is associated with clinically significant distress. There are two separate definitions – one for children, and one for adults and adolescents.

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**GENDER FLUID / GENDER EXPANSIVE / GENDER CREATIVE:** Conveys a wider, more flexible range of gender expression, with a range of interests and behaviors. Expanding beyond traditional gender stereotypes. It reinforces the notion that gender is not a binary, but a continuum; and that many children and adults express their gender in multiple ways.

**GENDER IDENTITY DISORDER (GID):** An outdated term from the previous version of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual 4. Deleted in the current manual because gender nonconformity is not a disorder.

**GENDER NONCONFORMING:** A person who has or is perceived to have gender characteristics and/or behaviors that do not conform to traditional or societal expectations of their biological sex. Gender nonconforming people may or may not identify as transgender, lesbian, or gay. Children express their gender nonconformity as early as two or three years of age. They strongly communicate through their behaviors and interests, that they “are” or they “want to be” of another gender. Not all gender nonconforming children grow up to be gender nonconforming adults. Gender nonconformity does not determine sexual orientation.

**GENDER NORMATIVE:** The expectation that one’s gender identity and expression fits society’s constructions and expectations of what it means to be a girl/woman or a boy/man.

**GENDER NORMS:** Culturally accepted patterns of behavior associated with men and women. Gender norms vary in different cultures.

**GENDER ROLE:** The set of socially defined roles and behaviors assigned to females and males. Gender roles vary from culture to culture, and over time.

**GENDER TRANSITION:** The experience by which a person goes from living and identifying as one gender to living and identifying as another. To affirm their gender identity people may go through different types of transitions.

*Social transition* can include name changes, changes in pronouns, and changes in appearance – clothes or hairstyle.

*Medical transition* includes use of hormone blockers or cross-hormones to promote gender based body changes.

*Surgical transition* modifies the body to remove or add gender related physical traits. It is a very individual process.

**GENDERQUEER:** Used by people who do not want to be labeled by fixed definitions of male/female or gay/straight.

**TRANSGENDER:** An umbrella term, which describes a wide range of identities, expressions, and experiences. It includes those whose gender assigned at birth does not match their internal sense of gender identity. A child who is transgender will assert firmly, over time that their gender identity is the not that which was assigned at birth. They will insist that they are in the wrong body. Not all gender nonconforming individuals consider themselves transgender.

**TRANS:** Short for transgender.

**TRANSSEXUAL:** A term for people who seek to live in a gender different from the one assigned at birth. They may seek medical intervention (through hormones and/or surgery) to live comfortably in the gender with which they identify. They usually live full time as a different gender than the one they were assigned at birth.

**TWO-SPIRIT:** A term used in some Native American cultures to refer to individuals who display both feminine and masculine traits. These individuals were often highly respected as healers or leaders. Now, many lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender Native Americans use this term to refer to themselves.

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## SEXUALITY RELATED TERMS

**DYKE:** When used outside of the LGBT community, it is often used as a biased and derogatory term for a masculine appearing lesbian. Some lesbians have reclaimed the use of the word to refer to themselves in a strong, positive light.

**GAY:** A generic term used to describe both men and women who are physically and emotionally attracted to someone of the same sex. Sometimes used just to refer to gay men. It is also used as a derogatory slur to describe anything, anyone or any behavior that does not meet the approval of an individual or a given group.

**HETERONORMATIVE:** The expectation that all individuals are heterosexuals. Often expressed subtly through assumptions that everyone is or will grow up to be straight.

**INTERSEX:** A general term that encompasses people who are born with chromosomes, hormones, genitalia and/or other sex characteristics that are not exclusively male or female.

**LESBIAN:** A woman who is sexually and romantically attracted to other women.

**LGBT AND LGBTQ OR LGBTQIA:** Acronym for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender. Q can stand for Questioning or Queer, I stands for Intersex, and A stands for Ally. Also abbreviated as GLBT.

**QUEER:** Historically a negative term for LGBT people. More recently reclaimed by some LGBT people to refer to themselves. Often used to reference a more flexible view of gender and/or sexuality. Some people still find the term offensive. Others use it as a more inclusive term that allows for more freedom of gender expression. Also used in academic fields, such as queer studies or queer pedagogy.

**QUESTIONING:** a person who is wondering about his or her sexual identity.

**SEXUALITY:** Considered an essential and natural characteristic of all people. It begins to develop in early childhood and continues over the course of one's lifetime.

**STRAIGHT:** Slang word for heterosexual.

## ADDITIONAL REFERENCES

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