

INFORMATION SHEET: Transgender and gender diverse children

This information sheet has been prepared for parents, caregivers and families of transgender and gender diverse (TGD) children.

An increasing number of children report a gender which differs to what society would typically expect of the assigned sex they were assigned at birth. It is important to remember that being transgender or gender diverse is not a mental health issue. However, mental health issues may arise for TGD children due to societal and cultural ideas about gender. Children can feel confused, scared marginalised and sad, and often experience a lack of support. They can also come up against negative attitudes, as well as laws and other institutional barriers which discriminate against (and do not properly acknowledge the existence of) TGD people. These experiences can be hard for a child to cope with without support.

This information sheet covers the following questions:

- What does it mean for a child to be transgender or gender diverse?
- What issues might be faced by a TGD child?
- How can parents/families support their TGD child?
- How can parents/families find professional help which is supportive and affirming?
- What are some useful further resources?

What does it mean for a child to be transgender or gender diverse?

Some useful definitions

Children whose gender differs to what society would typically expect of their gender assigned at birth are often referred to as **transgender** or **gender diverse** (TGD).

A **transgender** child generally refers to a child who was assigned as male at birth but is female, or a child who was assigned female but is male.

A **cisgender** child refers to a child who identifies with the gender they were assigned at birth

A **gender diverse** child refers to a child who may have a range of gender identities and practices, combine different genders, or identify as having a non-binary gender. Gender diverse children may express themselves in many different ways.

Non-binary refers to a child who may not be exclusively male or female. They may use pronouns to signal their non-binary gender, such as 'they'.

Gender dysphoria is the distress some transgender or gender diverse people feel when their body differs from other people of their gender.

A child with an **intersex variation** is a child who was born with chromosomes, genitals, and/or reproductive organs that do not fit into the narrow ideas of what constitutes 'male' or 'female'. Intersex children are different from transgender or gender diverse children.

Sexual orientation refers to who you are attracted to sexually. Gender is different from sexual orientation. Someone who is transgender or gender diverse may be heterosexual, gay, lesbian, bisexual, pansexual or asexual.

What issues might a child who is transgender or gender diverse face?

Mental health challenges

Children who are transgender or gender diverse may experience mental health challenges due to discrimination, and the ways in which TGD people are treated and positioned in society. This can involve higher rates of anxiety, depression, self-harm, and/or attempted suicides than the general population.

Negative school experiences

Children spend a lot of time in school. While some transgender and gender diverse children have positive experiences of school, this is often not the case. Negative school experiences include difficulties with peers and friendships, harassment and violence, fears for safety, social exclusion, issues in relation to uniforms, toilets and sports, and other forms of discrimination. Children may miss school or change schools in order to avoid such negative experiences, resulting in disrupted schooling, with potentially long-term consequences for their mental health, educational achievement, and future employment.

Fear of puberty

Physical changes in puberty like developing breasts, body and facial hair, and a deepening voice, can be particularly distressing for transgender and gender diverse children.

How can parents/families support their transgender or gender diverse child?

Support from families, as well as broader social support, is crucial to transgender and gender diverse children's mental health.

Affirm your child's expressed gender

It is essential to their child's wellbeing that parents, caregivers and families support the child and affirm the child's gender.

- Support your child in his or her gender expressions in the form of dress and activities.
- Use the names and pronouns that the child expresses (rather than those they were assigned at birth).

The degree to which parents and caregivers are positive and supportive has an impact not only on the child but also on all those around them, such as extended family, community, and schools, as they often seek their cues from how the child's family is responding.

There is no right age for your child to let you know they are transgender or gender diverse. Some children know as young as three years old and others may only realise when they are teenagers. Often a child has known for a long time before they find the courage to talk to someone. There is also no right or wrong way to be transgender or gender diverse. Each child will be different.

Seek support from a mental health professional

Even though being transgender or gender diverse itself is not a mental health issue, getting some support from a mental health professional who affirms your child's gender is likely to be helpful for children and their families as they navigate daily experiences and longer-term decisions.

A mental health professional can help:

- Affirm your child's gender and help them to feel accepted and normal for who they are.
- Help you navigate society's expectations of gender that can cause anxiety and depression.
- Assist with social transition as your child decides to show or let people know their preferred gender.
- Assist with access to gender-affirming medical treatment. Having the option of treatment in the form of hormone blockers (to delay puberty) or gender-affirming hormones can have a significant positive impact on the mental health of TGD children in particular.

The Australian Psychological Society recommends [mental health practices that affirm transgender people's experiences](#). The 'Find a Psychologist' service on the APS website can be used to identify a psychologist using the search option 'gender identity issues'. Visit the website <http://www.psychology.org.au/FindaPsychologist/> or phone 1800 333 497 (outside Melbourne) or (03) 8662 3300 (in Melbourne).

Seek support for yourself too

Learning about gender diversity for the first time can be challenging for parents and other family members. You might find it useful to:

- Talk with supportive friends and family members to help you explore some of your thoughts and feelings.
- Find a mental health professional who affirms your child's gender to support you too.
- Join a parent support group (online or in person).

Engage with your child's school/education setting to make improvements

There is an increasing awareness of transgender and gender diverse students in schools, largely due to the work of parents of transgender and gender diverse children and the Safe Schools Coalition. However, school communities (teachers, staff, principals, students, and parents/caregivers/families) may not always be knowledgeable or supportive. You might find it useful to:

- Engage with the Safe Schools Coalition if it is available in your home state or territory, and your child's school to work out plans for the child and ways of improving school knowledge and culture. Even supportive schools may welcome expert help supporting transgender and gender diverse children.
- Ask about inclusive policies for your child's school.
- Involve your child in deciding how and when their gender is to be disclosed.
- Enlist the help of the school psychologist or counsellor. They might be the first person at school (or first person at all) that your child talks to about being transgender or gender diverse, and may be important in facilitating knowledge and building support amongst the rest of the school community.
- Share with the school any resources you have found helpful.

What are some useful resources?

Websites

Parents of Gender Diverse Children - www.pgdc.org.au

- This website can refer parents to support online or in person anywhere in Australia

The Safe Schools Coalition developed a number of resources that are now located under [Safe Schools](#) on the national Student Wellbeing Hub:

- [Safe Schools Do Better](#)
- [Kick Starting Your Safe School](#)
- [Guide to Supporting a Student to Affirm or Transition Gender Identity at School](#)

Safe Schools Coalition Victoria -

<http://www.education.vic.gov.au/about/programs/health/Pages/safe-schools-coalition.aspx>

The Rainbow Owl - www.the-rainbow-owl.com

- Range of children's books

Proud2Play - www.proud2play.org.au

- This group can help parents, schools and sporting clubs with any sporting issues

Legal assistance across Australia:

- Justice Connect - www.justiceconnect.org.au
- Human Rights Law Centre - www.hrlc.org.au
- LGBTI Legal Service - www.lgbtilegalservice.org

Books

Brill, S., & Kenney, L. (2016). *The transgender teen: A handbook for parents and professionals supporting transgender and non-binary teens*. Jersey City: Cleis Press.

Brill, S., & Pepper, R. (2008). *The transgender child: A handbook for families and professionals*. San Francisco: Cleis Press.

Ehrensaft, D. (2016). *The gender creative child: Pathways for nurturing and supporting children who live outside gender boxes*. New York: The Experiment.

Ehrensaft, D. (2011). *Gender Born, Gender Made: Raising Healthy Gender-Nonconforming Children*. New York: The Experiment.

Bartholomaeus, C., & Riggs, D. W. (2017). *Transgender people and education*. New York: Palgrave.

Other useful references

Strauss, P., Cook, A., Winter, S., Watson, V., Wright Toussaint, D., Lin, A. (2017). *Trans Pathways: the mental health experiences and care pathways of trans young people. Summary of results*. Telethon Kids Institute, Perth, Australia.

<https://www.telethonkids.org.au/our-research/brain-and-behaviour/mental-health-and-youth/youth-mental-health/trans-pathways/>

Telfer, M.M., Tollit, M.A., Pace, C.C., & Pang, K.C. (2017). *Australian Standards of Care and Treatment Guidelines for Trans and Gender Diverse. Children and Adolescents*. Melbourne: The Royal Children's Hospital.

<https://www.rch.org.au/uploadedFiles/Main/Content/adolescent-medicine/AustralianStandardsOfCareandTreatmentGuidelinesforTransandGenderDiverseChildrenandAdolescents.pdf>