

Some Common Myths About Gender

Most of us have had little or no education about gender. So it's important to understand and address some common myths many of us hold about gender, children and youth.

Myth: Children are too young to know their gender.

Understanding of our gender comes to most of us fairly early in life. According to the American Academy of Pediatrics, “By age four, most children have a stable sense of their gender identity.” This core aspect of one’s identity comes from within each of us; it is an inherent aspect of a person’s make-up. We don’t question when cisgender children know their gender at a young age, so why do we question when transgender or nonbinary children know their gender at the same age?

Myth: We shouldn’t talk to young children about gender diversity.

We communicate with children about gender from the moment they are born. They are receiving messages and stereotypes about how boys and girls are supposed to look and behave, not only from adults, but also from peers, books, media, and through product marketing and advertising. Research indicates that these messages place children in strict boxes which can prevent them from reaching their full potential. Studies show how the messages kids receive about gender influence them at very early ages. For example, one study published in Science in 2017 showed that “At age 5, children seemed not to differentiate between boys and girls in expectations of 'really, really smart' — childhood’s version of adult brilliance. But by age 6, girls were prepared to lump more boys into the 'really, really smart' category and to steer themselves away from games intended for the 'really, really smart.' ” If we don’t proactively teach different messages to children about gender, they will simply absorb the messages out there – and we all lose out.

Myth: A person is only transgender if they declare it at a very young age.

While many transgender people say that they knew they were transgender as soon as they knew what “boys” and “girls” were, for many others, the journey to living openly as their affirmed gender is longer. For some, understanding their gender identity is a complex process that lasts into their teens, adulthood, or even old age. Many people have a general feeling of being “different” but don’t connect that feeling to their gender until they are exposed to new language or find role models in whom they can see themselves reflected. While early childhood is one common time for kids to name their gender, people can come to understand their gender at any age. The onset of puberty is another very common time children come to better understand - and communicate - matters regarding their gender, as is during college. Sometimes a transgender or nonbinary person will come out as gay, lesbian, or bisexual before recognizing that it is their gender, not their sexuality, that they are struggling with. Stigma, lack of knowledge and fear of rejection by family and peers can keep transgender people from sharing their gender as children or teens. Research indicates that there is a significant gap between a child’s

understanding that their gender doesn't conform to expectations and when they communicate with others (namely parents) about it. In one study, the average age of self-realization for the child that they were transgender or non-binary was 7.9 years old, but the average age when they disclosed their understanding of their gender was 15.5 years old.

Myth: There are only two genders.

The two most common genders are boy and girl (or man and woman), and often people think that these are the only two genders. This idea that there are only two genders is called the "gender binary." If a child has a binary gender, that means they identify as either a boy or a girl, regardless of the sex they were assigned at birth.

But gender is a spectrum, and not limited to just two possibilities. A person may have a nonbinary gender, meaning they do not identify strictly as a boy or a girl – they could identify as both, or neither, or as another gender entirely. Agender people do not identify with any gender.

Myth: Many transgender children "change their mind" about their gender.

This is an important issue and one we can't truly do justice to in this brief format, but here are a few things to consider: not all children and youth who express themselves in gender expansive ways are transgender. Gender identity and gender expression are different aspects of our gender. Often, both in research and media reports, this distinction isn't properly made. Given the limited vocabulary we provide children and youth with for gender, it can take some time for them to find the language that fits for them when it comes to gender identity. What we know from medical and mental health experts as well as from research in the area is that transgender children are at least as certain in their gender identity as other children are in theirs. The longer an identity persists, especially one that is consciously considered and consistently asserted, the less likely it is to change.

While rare, there are instances where a person's identity will change. That is true for all people-cisgender, transgender and nonbinary identified alike. It is part of being human. Where we seem to get stuck as a society is what to do with this rare but possible experience. If we take it out of the discussion regarding what "people" do generally, and focus on an individual child, it becomes a little easier to determine whether a specific child is likely to remain consistent in their identity. There are indicators that qualified, skilled professionals can help the parents and the child understand. But we need to underscore that the research on the importance of affirming people in their gender is unequivocal - it is essential for all, and life-saving for some.

We all want to experience gender congruence - the feeling of harmony in the three dimensions (body, identity and social aspects) of our gender. We want to be seen by others as we see ourselves. Finding congruence is an ongoing process that evolves as we continue to grow and gain insight into ourselves and is most often found through exploration. Any way we can help a child to find congruence is important and essential to their health and well-being.

Myth: Being transgender or nonbinary is a sign of mental illness.

Being transgender or nonbinary is not a mental illness.

Some gender-diverse people experience gender dysphoria which is a diagnosis in the DSM. However, this refers to the distress some people experience as a result of a disconnect between their gender and their sex. Minority stress factors often take a toll on transgender and nonbinary youth, who then experience levels of depression and anxiety as a result of the harassment, discrimination, bullying and stigmatization they experience. Outside of these minority stress factors, research indicates that gender-diverse youth who have parental support and are affirmed in their gender have similar mental health profiles as their cisgender peers.

Myth: Transgender and nonbinary people are doomed to live unhappy lives.

While it is true that transgender and nonbinary youth are at significantly higher risk for suicide, non-suicidal self-injury, substance abuse, eating disorders, anxiety and depression compared to their cisgender counterparts, there are known factors that can improve their mental health and well-being. The most significant factor in a gender-expansive young person's well-being is the support of family. Transgender and nonbinary people of all ages find love, create families, and live fulfilling lives.