# Gender Inclusive Schools:
# Counseling and Supporting Students and Families

**1. Are there specific considerations to take into account when discussing a child's gender identity with parents from varying cultural/religious backgrounds?**

Care should be taken to find connections between gender diversity and a family's foundational heritage, traditions, and culture. Culturally responsive resources are critical for families who may fear or experience rejection from their traditional communities of support as they seek resources to better understand or advocate for their transgender or gender-expansive child.

Gender diversity can be found in all racial, cultural, and religious communities (Passalacqua & Cervantes, 2008; Harley et al., 2002). There are organizations and leaders supportive of gender diversity within some of the most traditionally conservative religious denominations, and this support is representative of racial and cultural diversity. Many families find that they do not need to change the core of who they are to accept their gender-expansive child, although some do change their individual places of worship in order to find a religious community more accepting of gender diversity.

Explore these sites for more information about gender and religion and about gender and communities of color. The Family Acceptance Project has resources for families in English, Spanish, and Chinese, as well as resources specific for Mormon families. PFLAG has a National Network for families of color who have LGBTQ children. The National LGBTQ Task Force's Institute for Welcoming Resources includes "*trans*ACTION: A Transgender Curriculum for Churches and Religious Institutions" and a bilingual guide, "A La Familia: A Conversation About Our Families, the Bible, Sexual Orientation." The film *The Year We Thought About Love* has an extensive resource guide for parents of diverse religious and cultural backgrounds.

**2. What should I do if a parent is not supportive of a student's gender expression or identity?**

Immediate resistance to a child's gender expression is not necessarily a fixed position; many of the strongest advocates of their transgender children initially experienced varying degrees of denial, confusion, and resistance before moving towards acceptance and/or celebration of their gender-expansive child. Initial lack of support can be rooted in fear, misinformation, or grief stemming from parents' perception that they have lost the child they thought they had. School psychologists can play a critical role in moving a parent in the direction of acceptance by listening to fears and concerns, while providing accurate information. Helping the parent to connect with others who might be facing similar life events can be paramount in the journey to acceptance. Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG), social media groups, and local medical practices specializing in the care of gender nonconforming youth often provide family support.

Most parents want what is best for their children. Research by the Family Acceptance Project (FAP) has found that the primary strategy to increase family acceptance is helping parents or caregivers understand the risk factors (mental health problems, suicide, poor educational outcomes, etc.) associated with family rejection (SAMSHA, 2014). Through this process parents and caregivers can come to understand that actions they think may be protecting their child can in fact be harmful. According to FAP, even a slight increase of affirming behaviors on the part of parents (or a slight decrease of nonaffirming behaviors) can lead to positive outcomes for transgender or gender-expansive youth.

Young children whose parents do not affirm their gender identity or gender expression face considerable challenges (Toomey, Ryan, Diaz, Card, & Russell, 2010). Supportive adults in their schools or extended families are key elements in fostering resilience and a positive sense of self as children explore and evolve their gender identities. These supportive adults can engage students in conversations about how to manage discord at home while minimizing the possibility of self-destructive behaviors.

**3. Is there research that looks at the causes for transgender youth having depression as a result of internal issues versus environmental factors (rejection and negative treatment)?**

Even if they have the opportunity to go through hormone treatment and surgery, some young people are distressed by the mismatch between their body and their gender identity. Research in this area is complicated by the difficulties in separating the internal and environmental contributors to mental health challenges. It is well established that environmental factors such as rejection and negative treatment are associated with mental health challenges for these individuals (e.g., Nuttbrock et al., 2010; Toomey et al., 2010).

Transgender young people who receive hormone blockers to suppress puberty show a marked improvement in psychological functioning. As stated previously in this document, medical intervention for transgender youth is associated with better mental health outcomes. (de Vries et al., 2014).

**4. When assessing a transgender student using a standardized instrument, what norm group should I use if there is no "combined sex" group?**

This issue relates primarily to emotional/social rating scales and personality instruments. It's important to realize that all such norms are based on student self-reported sex, family-reported sex, or student sex as reported in school records. All three of these may be different than the student's sex assigned at birth – indeed, a clinician may not know a student's biological sex, or that a student is transgender. The issue comes up when the clinician is aware that the student has a transgender history, identifies as "non-binary", or may have an intersex history.  When possible, clinicians should use combined sex norms. Combined norms identify all students with the same level of need, regardless of gender. Gender-specific norms are useful if it's important to identify equal numbers of males and females for a program, reducing gender disproportionality. If gender-specific norms must be used, use the student's preferred gender, although a clinician may wish to score the protocol by both male and female norms to determine if different decisions would be made. If the decision would be the same by either set of norms, which gender norms are used are less clinically relevant, but highly salient socially – if the gender norms are at variance with the student's affirmed gender, this may damage the clinician-student or clinician-family relationship. In cases where the decision is difficult as to which norms should be used, consider with parental support, obtaining supervision from a more experienced colleague and document that supervision and decision.

**5. Should we use labels like emotionally disabled to ensure eligibility for special education services and protections when the problems stem primarily from a nonaccepting environment?**

Special education eligibility is based on identified disability and specialized instructional needs. The priority should be on identifying the students' needs and providing adequate services rather than a special education label, but the reality remains that in some school districts, a student will not receive the protections and/or services they require without an Individualized Education Program. A transgender or gender nonconforming identity in itself is not a disabling condition. However, it is certainly possible for a student with a transgender identity to *also* have a disability as defined within the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act. Practitioners are required to review a student's mental health status or presenting difficulties within the context of developmental history which might explain, but should not exclude a child, from necessitating special education services in order to access the curriculum. It is known that emotional disability can be caused by environmental circumstances. It should be noted, however, that public schools should not be charged with nor expected to provide a child's *only* services, as coordination between schools and community mental health and medical services lead to the best possible outcomes for youth.

**6. If a student's depression and anxiety appear to be rooted in lack of acceptance at school or within their family, should the focus be on the environment as opposed to presenting symptoms?**

Anxiety and depression, regardless of the origin, should be fully addressed. Family and school-wide, universal interventions as well as targeted support should be offered to students who struggle behaviorally, socially, or emotionally.

**7. How do I explain what transgender means to young students?**

Depending on the context of the question, you may initially ask the child what they think the word means or where they have heard it. Keep your answers simple, developmentally appropriate, and create a context that is easy to understand. You may want to consider some of the following strategies/language:

- Ask a question: *Where have you heard the word transgender? What do you think it means?*
- Set a context the child understands: *There are lots of ways to be a boy or a girl! The things we like to do, the way our bodies look, and what we like to wear are all different.*
- Provide a definition: *Sometimes when a baby is born, people say that's a boy, or that's a girl. A person who is transgender is someone who realizes that even though everyone around them thinks they are a boy or a girl, that's not how they feel inside. Our feelings about who we are come from the inside, not from the outside.*
- Revisit the larger context: *There are lots of things we don't know about a person by just looking at them from the outside. Think about all the wonderful things about you that no one knows just by looking at you!*

Also see below for bibliography of books for children and young adults.

**8. How do I help the general student body respect gender diversity?**

Gender Spectrum suggests four entry points for creating a gender inclusive school.

- Personal: Involves reflection by educators about how their experiences and beliefs about gender impact the work they do with students.
- Structural: Involves inclusive policies, professional development, family engagement, inclusive facilities such as restrooms, visible displays modeling gender diversity, and inclusive procedures and forms.
- Interpersonal: These are the intentional ways in which individual interactions and communications demonstrate alternatives to binary notions of gender. These include modeling many ways to be a boy, a girl, or other identities; teaching empathy and respect; and providing concrete examples of gender diversity.
- Instructional: These are specific ways of incorporating gender diversity into existing curriculum or using additional lesson plans to reinforce gender diversity.

See Gender Spectrum's Framework for Gender Inclusive Schools for more information. While implementing systemic change as described in this framework takes time, there are some actions you can take immediately.

**9. What books or resources can help me facilitate conversations with students?**

Below are a few examples. For more books check out Welcoming Schools and Gender Spectrum bibliographies, which can be used to facilitate conversations with young children and provide stimulating educational materials for teachers and other school professionals.

**Picture Books**

*All I Want to Be Is Me* (2011) – Rothblatt, P. Teaches about gender diversity and acceptance as well as friendship and respecting differences. It shows gender nonconformity in a positive and respectful light. The corresponding website, http://www.alliwanttobeisme.com/ provides teaching examples for parents and teachers as well as the opportunity to hear the song by the same name. (Ages 4–8)

*I Am Jazz* (2014) – Herthel, J. and Jennings, J. The story of a transgender teen told by Jazz Jennings herself. Jazz socially transitioned to female, with her parents' support, in kindergarten. The book helps children to understand transgender identities and the inner/outer struggle persons face. (Ages 4–8)

*Goblinheart* (2012) – Brett, A. and Bidlespacher, T. Using "fairy" and "goblin" in lieu of female and male, the author has created a timely allegorical fairy tale. A youngster named Julep, who lives in a forest tribe, insists on growing up to be a goblin rather than a fairy. The tribe learns to accept that Julep is a goblin at heart, eventually coming around to support the physical transition that must be made for Julep to live as a goblin. Can be purchased directly from the author on eBay. (Ages 4–7)

*Jacob's New Dress* (2014) – Hoffman, S., Hoffman, I., & Case, C. Jacob loves playing dress-up, when he can be anything he wants to be. Some kids at school say he can't wear girl clothes, but Jacob wants to wear a dress to school. Can he convince his parents to let him wear what he wants? This book helps readers to understand the challenges kids experience when they do not conform to gender stereotypes in dress and actions. (Ages 4–7)

*My Princess Boy* (2010) – Dyson is a boy who likes to wear dresses and things that sparkle as well as wearing jeans and climbing trees. The story teaches about acceptance of gender differences and unconditional love. The author of the book is Dyson's mother, who wants others to better understand children like her gender-expansive son. One of the few books about gender-expansive children that features an African American family. (Ages 4–8)

*The Princess Knight* (2003) – Funk, Co. Despite the taunting of her brothers, Princess Violetta becomes a talented knight, and when her father proposes to give her hand in marriage to the knight who wins a tournament, Violetta uses her brains as well as her brawn to outwit him. (Ages 4–7)

*Red* (2015) – Hall, M. A crayon has a blue body with a bright red label wrapped around it, causing all the other crayons in its life to push it to draw strawberries and other red objects. The crayon's path to being true to itself is a great jumping off point for conversations about gender. The book raises questions about expectations and identities without being didactic. (Age 4–8)

*White Dynamite and Curly Kidd* (1986) – Martin, B. & Archambault, H. As Curly prepares to ride the "meanest bull in the whole United States," he explains to his proud but worried child how he overcomes his fear: He thinks about places he'd like to see. Lucky Kidd calls encouragement to dad. The story, told in dialogue, begs to be read aloud, and challenges our assumptions about gender expressions with what may be a surprise ending. (Ages 4+)

**Chapter Books and Young Adult Books**

*Beyond Magenta: Transgender Teens Speak Out* (2014) – Kuklin, S. Interviews with six transgender or gender neutral teens. Portraits, family photographs, and candid images grace the pages, augmenting the emotional and physical journey each youth has taken. (Grades 7–12)

*Beautiful Music for Ugly Children* (2012) – Cron Mills, K. Gabe has a secret. He is really Liz. Only his parents and his lifelong best friend, Paige, know. But when a girl at school, where he is callously called "that lesbo chick," discovers the truth and outs Gabe, things become difficult, if not downright dangerous. In the meantime, Gabe is a part-time DJ on the local community radio station, where his show, "Beautiful Music for Ugly Children," is fast becoming an underground hit. Will his fans reject him when they, too, discover the truth? (Grades 9–12)

*George* (2015) – Gino, A. When people look at George, they think they see a boy. But she knows she's not a boy. She knows she's a girl. George thinks she'll have to keep this a secret forever. Then her teacher announces that their class play is going to be Charlotte's Web. With the help of her best friend, Kelly, George comes up with a plan not just to be Charlotte, but to let everyone know who she is. (Grades 4–7)

*Gracefully Grayson* (2014) – Polonsky, A. Grayson Sender has been holding onto a secret for what seems like forever: He is a girl. The weight of this secret is crushing, but sharing it would mean facing ridicule, rejection, or worse. Grayson was orphaned in preschool and lives with her aunt and uncle in Chicago. She has a supportive teacher and a new friend but also has to contend with bullying and disapproving adults in her own family. Despite the risks, Grayson's true self struggles to break free. (Grades 4–8)

*Lizard Radio* (2015) – Schmatz, P. Lizard's adoptive family has always resisted authority, but attending camp as a teen makes it easier to avoid being sent to the prisonlike Blight as an adult. As a midrange bender— roughly equivalent, in today's terms, to having a nonbinary gender—Lizard is at risk of being sent to Blight. At camp, Lizard unexpectedly forms deep connections to other campers. Sophisticated, character-driven science fiction, as notable for its genderqueer protagonist as for its intricate, suspenseful plot. (From Kirkus Review; Grades 7–12)

*Riding Freedom* (1999) – Munoz, P. Charlotte Parkhurst is raised in an orphanage for boys, which suits her just fine. She doesn't like playing with dolls, she can hold her own in a fight, and she loves to work in the stables. Charlotte has a way with horses and wants to spend her life training and riding them on a ranch of her own. The problem is, as a girl in the mid-1800s, Charlotte is expected to live a much different life—one without freedom. But Charlotte is smart and determined, and she figures out a way to live her dreams with a plan so clever and so secret—almost no one figures it out. Based on the true story of Charley Parkhurst. Spanish edition: *Un Caballo Llamada Libertad*. (Grades 3–7)

*The Gender Quest Workbook: A Guide for Teens and Young Adults Exploring Gender Identity* (2015) Testa, R. An open-ended workbook offers young people questioning their gender identity tools for thinking, feeling, and strategizing. Introductory chapters lay out such basic concepts as gender identity, gender expression, and differences between sex and gender. Later chapters discuss various areas of life where gender comes into play, from family to school and work to dating and sex. Information is presented in brief, straightforward segments, but exercises for readers form the bulk of each chapter. An invaluable resource for all young people on a gender quest. (From Kirkus Review; Grades 7–12)

**10. What are the implications of practicing school psychology as an "out" member of the LGBTQ community? Does being out contribute to a more positive climate for transgender and gender-expansive individuals?**

Many factors contribute to an LGBTQ school employee's decision whether to be out about gender identity or sexual orientation (Davidson, 2015). While it is an individual decision, many wonder what the impact of an out educator will have on students. While little research has been done in this area, a study of LGBTQ school psychologists concluded the following:

- Professional and personal relationships were described as being stronger and more positive when the school psychologist was out; not being out created a barrier to connecting and building rapport with others.
- LGBT-identified school psychologists would consider coming out directly to a student who was trying to figure out his/her own orientation and gender identity, if they believed such would benefit the student.
- "I want to tell you that what you're doing is very brave and very good for our students; I'm really glad that you're here." (Parent to transgender school psychologist) [Executive Summary: Conclusions & Implications by Sowden, Fleming, Savage, and Woitawszewski (2015)].

These findings make intuitive sense. If students see that educators do not feel safe being open about their own identity, the school is unlikely to feel safe for students. Conversely, seeing an educator being open about their gender identity or sexual orientation sends a strong message of acceptance.

Some educators may not come out for fear of being fired. The majority of states do not have employment laws that protect transgender teachers. At the time of this document's publication, according to the ACLU, 20 states currently have employment antidiscrimination that are inclusive of gender identity (see the ACLU's list of state-by-state antidiscrimination in employment policies).

## 11. What are best practice recommendations for working with persons on the autism spectrum who are gender-expansive and/or transgender?

Preliminary research shows the rate of gender variance among persons who are on the autism spectrum is 10 times that of the general population (de Vries et al., 2010). It is important to recognize that a person on the spectrum may want to present as another gender, but because they lack social awareness, they can't copy behaviors well (Zaks, 2015). This should not preclude dysphoria or trans identity, but indicates the need for help in understanding the behavior of others. Strategies for working with gender diverse students on the autism spectrum, as presented by Zosia Zaks at the Gender Conference East 2015 Professional Symposium, include:

1. Accommodate concrete thinking.
    a. Break down abstractions.
    b. Use visuals.
    c. Watch out for "dense" questions on psychological testing.
    d. Avoid idiomatic language.
    e. Don't ask a question when you really are making a directive.

2. Accept whatever is communicated as valid and purposeful.

3. Use a 5-point scale modified to areas of special interest.

4. Utilize multiple modes of consent, which can be used as "evidence of need to transition." Consent can be determined by factors including:

    - Behavior: If a person expresses an interest in transitioning and changes their behavior to demonstrate their desire (i.e., dresses as another gender).
    - Quality of life as consent: If a person's quality of life improves when presenting as another gender.
    - Self-harm reduction: If incidents of self-harm decrease when presenting as another gender.

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Acknowledgments:

*Note.* This document is one from a series of four topical sets of frequently asked questions related to creating safe and inclusive learning environments for transgender and gender-expansive students. The series was developed in collaboration by Gender Spectrum and NASP. For the full series and a corresponding reference list, see www.nasponline.org/resources-and-publications/resources/diversity/lgbtq-youth.