Understanding Your Child's Gender Identity

Highlights

Your child's gender identity is their sense of who they are.
Most children start to understand their gender identity at around 3 to 4 years of age.
Gender roles are what society expects of males and females.
Gender roles can impact your child's development and influence their experiences later in life.
Being a positive role model and respecting your child's gender identity can support their wellbeing.

In This Article

What Should I Do if I Think My Child is Gender Diverse?
Gender Dysphoria

What is Gender?

The terms 'sex' and 'gender' are often confused, but they mean different things.

Your sex refers to your physical anatomy at birth. You will be assigned male, female, or intersex, depending on your external genitals \(sex organs\).

Your gender identity is your sense of who you are. Your child may identify as a boy, a girl, or another gender. Gender identity can also be fluid, meaning it can change over time, in different places.

What are Gender Roles and Stereotypes?

Gender roles are responsibilities expected of someone based on their assigned sex.

Gender stereotypes are characteristics expected of someone based on their assigned sex.

Gender roles and stereotypes are socially constructed. This means they reflect what society thinks is appropriate for a specific sex or gender identity.
Gender roles can change and vary with:

Place and location
Cultural norms and traditions
Time

Gender roles are often presented through:

Toys
Sports and games
Clothes
Books
Media
Education

Other people, like your child's teachers and family members

This means your child may learn about gender roles from a very young age.

When Do Children Become Aware of Gender?

Most children start to understand their gender identity at around 3 to 4 years of age. They express their identity through play, behaviour, and choices.

For most children, their gender identity will match their sex. They might choose things traditionally associated with their assigned sex, like:

Toys
Colours
Clothes

They may also prefer to play with other children who are the same sex as themselves. For example, boys may play together with trucks, and girls may play together with dolls.

How Can Gender Roles Impact My Child?

Pressures from gender roles can impact your child.

Your child may see gender roles as rules they need to follow based on their sex and gender. This can affect their:

Behaviours
Likes and dislikes
Expectations

It can also limit your child's experiences and development. Your child may be led to choose certain toys, books, and activities based on gender roles.

This can impact their expectations and choices later in life, including:

Self-esteem and confidence
Relationships

Academic and career goals

How Can I Model Positive Gender Roles for My Child?

Being a good role model is important because children often copy adult role models, such as parents or teachers. There are many ways to model positive gender roles.

Gender roles may make your child think that there are 'men's jobs' and 'women's jobs'. Let your child see you doing a variety of tasks that may not be typical for your gender.

Encourage other adults in their life to do both 'men's jobs' like mowing the lawn and 'women's jobs' like cooking and cleaning.

Your child may also be exposed to stereotypes that one gender is better at certain things. It's important to tell your child that:

People of any gender can excel at different things
They have the freedom to follow the sports or activities that interest them
It's OK if their interests are not traditionally linked to their gender

How Can I Help Break Gender Stereotypes?

Praise your child and others around them for all good behaviours, regardless of whether they are stereotypically male or female. This might include if they are:

Neat and tidy
Courageous
Kind
Physically active

Give your child a wide range of toys to play with, such as:

Trucks
Dolls
Action figures
Blocks

You can also give your child games and books that are gender-neutral or show people in non-stereotypical roles, like a female firefighter or a male nurse.

Other things you can do include:

Using gender-neutral terms such as 'firefighter' rather than 'fireman'
Encouraging your child to be friends with everyone
Encouraging them to try a range of activities

These things can help your child break gender stereotypes when they want to be themselves.

Diversity in Gender Expression

Your child might show diversity in how they express their gender. This could include:

A preference for toys typically associated with another sex
A preference for clothes typically worn by another sex
Certain behaviours, for example, a young female standing up to urinate \(wee\)

This doesn't necessarily mean that they have a different gender identity. It's normal for children to experiment with gender roles and make sense of their place in the world.

What is Gender Incongruence?

Having a gender identity that is different from your biological sex is called gender incongruence.

When your child's gender identity is the same as their sex assigned at birth, this is called being cisgender.

People with gender incongruence may use many different terms to describe their identity, including:

Transgender \(or trans\)

Nonbinary
Gender diverse

What Should I Do if I Think My Child is Gender Diverse?

Some gender-diverse and trans children express their diversity from a very young age. Others don't express a gender-diverse or trans identity until they are older.

Talk to your child about their identity.

If your child continues to show preference for a different gender identity than the one assigned at birth, don't rush to label them. First, talk with them and ask about their feelings. This can help them feel safe to talk about their identity.

Let your child express themselves to build positive self-esteem. Let them share things with you at their own pace, and:

Do not shame your child's gender expression
Do not allow others in your family to ridicule your child's gender expression
Do not prevent your child from expressing their gender in public

If you think your child is gender diverse or trans, you can support them by using gender-affirming language. Show your admiration for your child's identity and how they express it.

Gender Dysphoria

Someone with gender incongruence may find living as their assigned sex distressing. This is known as gender dysphoria.

Gender roles and stereotypes do not have a large influence on your child's gender identity. However, they can play a role in dysphoria in children who have gender incongruence.

Tools And Assistance

If you're seeking more information or support for your child's gender identity and expression, the following tools and services can help:

Health professionals - Talk to your GP, child psychologist, or pediatrician if you have concerns about your child's gender identity or emotional wellbeing.
School counsellors - Many schools offer support services that can help children navigate gender identity, relationships, and bullying.
Support organisations - Look for local or national LGBTQIA+ organisations that provide resources, parent support groups, and safe spaces for gender-diverse children and teens.
Helplines - Some regions have dedicated hotlines for parents and children dealing with gender identity issues. These services can offer immediate advice and emotional support.
Educational materials - Books, videos, and workshops about gender identity and inclusivity can help both you and your child better understand and embrace gender diversity.

Let me know if you'd like me to suggest specific organisations or resources for your region.