



A GUIDE FOR PARENTS AND PROFESSIONALS

CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT

UNDERSTANDING GENDER IDENTITY, SEXUAL ORIENTATION, AND MENTAL HEALTH

Children and youth are constantly growing, not just physically, but emotionally, socially, and psychologically. Understanding how gender identity and sexual orientation develops and unfolds is essential for supporting overall mental health and preventing issues like disordered eating and other mental health challenges.

KEY TERMINOLOGY REGARDING GENDER IDENTITY:

- **Gender identity** is a child's inner sense of being a boy, girl, neither, or anywhere along the spectrum.
- **Gender expression** is how a child shows their gender to the world through things like clothing, hairstyles, or behavior.
- **Sex assigned at birth** is a medical term that refers to the physical traits a child is born with such as chromosomes, hormones, and anatomy.

Gender Identity

Understanding key terms around gender identity helps families talk about identity and development with clarity and compassion. Most children begin to understand gender around age two and have a sense of identity by age four. Diverse gender identities are a normal part of human development.

The Gender Unicorn

Graphic by: **TSER**
Trans-Student Educational Resources

- Gender Identity**
 - Female/Woman/Girl
 - Male/Man/Boy
 - Other Gender(s)
- Gender Expression**
 - Feminine
 - Masculine
 - Other
- Sex Assigned at Birth**
 - Female
 - Male
 - Other/Intersex
- Physically Attracted to**
 - Women
 - Men
 - Other Gender(s)
- Emotionally Attracted to**
 - Women
 - Men
 - Other Gender(s)

To learn more, go to: www.transstudent.org/gender

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Development During Puberty

Puberty brings changes and transitions that shape how youth understand themselves and relate to others.

What is Puberty?

Puberty is the time when a child's body begins to mature into an adult body capable of sexual reproduction. It usually starts between ages eight and fourteen years, though timing can vary widely.

Puberty is triggered by hormonal changes that affect:

- Physical growth
- Brain development
- Emotional regulation
- Social relationships

Physical Changes During Puberty

Physical changes can feel different for every young person. For some, including gender diverse youth whose bodies may develop in ways that don't fully reflect their gender identity, puberty may bring mixed emotions.

Common physical changes are:

- Growth of reproductive organs (e.g., testes, ovaries, breasts)
- Onset of menstruation or sperm production
- Development of secondary sex characteristics (e.g., body hair, voice changes, and body shape)

Youth who develop earlier or later than their peers are more likely to feel unsure about the changes they're experiencing and may affect their body image. With understanding, open communication, and reassurance from caring adults, most young people navigate these changes with growing confidence and a stronger sense of who they are.

Supportive environments help children develop a positive body image and self-worth. Early intervention and open conversations can prevent mental health issues from escalating.

Need Help Starting the Conversation?

Visit our "We're Here to Help You Start the Conversation" series featuring lived experiences, including Lavender's Story of recovery.

For more resources see more EmbodyBC infosheets:

- Raising Kids with a Healthy Body Image
- Body Image and Self-Esteem
- Resilience and Bouncing Back
- Health, not Weight

For further resources about how to talk to your child about sexual health, visit TeachingSexualHealth.ca and look for their parent guides.

For more info:
embodybc.com
heretohelp.ca

EmbodyBC equips parents and professionals with trusted resources to support young people before they develop an eating disorder. EmbodyBC is a provincial program of Family Services of the North Shore, and one of the six BC Partners for Mental Health and Substance Use Information.

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Being there for your child is more than just words and affirmations. Being there for your child is supporting them even when they are not in the room.

Did you know?

ACCORDING TO A 2024 GOVERNMENT OF CANADA HEALTH REPORT, DIFFERENCES IN 2SLBTQIA+ YOUTH MENTAL HEALTH WERE NOT FULLY EXPLAINED BY THEIR ACCESS TO SUPPORT ALONE, SUGGESTING THAT UNMEASURED ASPECTS OF MINORITY STRESS MAY PLAY A SIGNIFICANT ROLE.

Emotional Changes During Puberty

Significant emotional changes emerge during this time, shaping mood, self perception, and relationships. As feelings become more complex, young people may notice surprising emotional reactions or stronger versions of familiar ones.

- Increased self-awareness and identity exploration
- Mood swings and emotional sensitivity
- Desire for privacy and autonomy
- Possible emergence of romantic and sexual attraction

Youth begin to question or affirm their sexual orientation and gender identity during this time, which can be confusing without supportive environments.

Social Development During Puberty

Key aspects of social development emerge in this period, shaping how young people interact with others, interpret their world, and build a sense of belonging.

- Peer relationships become more important
- Greater desire for independence
- Pressure to conform to gender norms and beauty standards increases
- Exposure to media and societal expectations can shape body image and self-worth
- Youth may become curious about dating or exploring romantic relationships

Mental Health and Disordered Eating

Youth who feel misunderstood or unsupported in their gender and/or sexual identity are at higher risk for gender dysphoria, substance use, anxiety, depression, and disordered eating.

Disordered eating often stems from:

- Body image dissatisfaction
- Low self-esteem
- Social pressures around weight, shape and appearance

What is Minority Stress?

Minority stress is the ongoing stress experienced by people from marginalized groups, like 2SLGBTQIA+ youth, because of the discrimination, bullying, stigma, and exclusion. Minority stress can lead to mental health challenges, but affirmation and acceptance help reduce this stress and build resilience.

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UNDERSTANDING AND SUPPORTING YOUR CHILD'S GENDER AND SEXUAL IDENTITY IS NOT JUST ABOUT ACCEPTANCE, IT'S A POWERFUL TOOL FOR PROMOTING LIFELONG MENTAL HEALTH AND PREVENTING SERIOUS ISSUES LIKE DISORDERED EATING.

You do not need to have all the answers; your love, openness, and willingness to learn can make all the difference.

KEY FACTS:

- Trans boys/men and nonbinary youth assigned female at birth (AFAB) report the highest rates of disordered eating and eating disorders across all gender identities.
- 2SLGBTQIA+ youth with eating disorders are more likely to attempt suicide.
- 2SLGBTQIA+ youth are more likely to experience homelessness, increasing their vulnerability to disordered eating.
- Body dissatisfaction is a common stressor among transgender individuals, often linked to gender dysphoria and societal expectations.

What Parents and Caregivers Can Do

While many parents and caregivers are supportive, some may initially struggle to understand or adapt when someone they love comes out as transgender or gender diverse. These parents and caregivers may benefit from further guidance and resources. Working through personal concerns separately allows parents and caregivers to be fully present and supportive for their child.

1 Create a Safe Space

- Encourage open conversations about feelings, sexuality, identity, and relationships
- Avoid assuming the gender to whom your child is attracted
- Normalize the use of gender-neutral language when referring to groups of people or people whose gender is unknown
- Avoid gender stereotypes in toys, activities, and expectations

2 Affirm Identity

- Support and use correct names and pronouns
- Validate your child's experience
- Do your own personal work in understanding your child's identity and how it changes their worldview

Being an ally is more than just words and affirmations. Being an ally to your child is supporting them even when they are not in the room.

3 Watch for Signs Your Child may be Struggling

- Sudden changes in eating habits, mood, or social withdrawal.
- Expressions of shame or discomfort about their body or identity.

4 Advocate for Inclusive Care

- Seek professionals trained in youth development, 2SLGBTQIA+ issues, mental health, and disordered eating.
- Use tools like the [NEDA's Parent Toolkit](#) for guidance and to learn more about supporting loved ones, and information about eating disorders.

5 Challenge Body Norms

- Avoid reinforcing narrow beauty standards or gendered expectations
- Model acceptance and inclusivity of all body shapes and sizes, including your own! Speak kindly about your own body and role model self-acceptance.
- Reflect and be aware of your own biases and how they may impact your relationship with your child.

6 Educate Yourself

- Learn about gender diversity and sexual development.
- To learn more, please see our attached resources list for a variety of topics to further your knowledge and understanding.

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