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Is my child transgender? What experts say parents need to know



Maressa Brown

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An average of nearly 2% of high school students in the U.S. identify as transgender, according to data from a [2019 survey](#) done by the Centers for Disease Control & Prevention (CDC). The survey also emphasized the need for coordinated efforts among healthcare providers and educators to support transgender youth. But well before doctors and teachers have a role to play, parents might find themselves wondering how they can best support a child who says their gender isn't in line with the sex they were assigned when they were born.

[Transgender](#) is the general term used to describe people whose gender identity differs from the sex they were assigned at birth, explains Levi Stolove, a licensed master social worker and staff therapist at the Institute for Human Identity, the longest-running LGBTQ+-affirmative therapy center in the U.S. Other individuals who feel that their gender is neither male or female or somewhere in between or beyond the two genders, may identify as nonbinary.

No matter how your child will ultimately identify, parental support is key, says Stolove. "Study after study shows that parental support of trans and nonbinary children is the best predictor of their psychological well-being as adults," he notes.

If you're hoping to gain clarity on your child's gender identity in order to offer them the support they most need, consider experts' and parents' guidance on

these common questions.

What's the difference between transgender, gender-nonconforming and nonbinary?

Here are the key differences among transgender, gender-nonconforming and gender nonbinary, according to Stolove:

Transgender: A general term used to describe people whose gender identity differs from the sex they were assigned at birth.

Gender-nonconforming: A person who might express their gender in ways that aren't stereotypical for that gender. For example, a boy might feel like a boy but enjoys wearing dresses.

Nonbinary: An individual who feels they are not a boy or a girl but a gender that does not fit into the definition of male and female. American society subscribes to the idea that there are only two genders, but there have been many societies throughout the world that have many genders. For example, the Bugis people of Indonesia have five different genders.

How can a parent know if their child is transgender?

All of the experts and parents Care.com spoke with emphasized listening to your child as the answer to this question. "Children are the only experts on their gender identity," says Stolove.

Many kids explore and play with aspects of gender, he explains, pointing to research published in the journal [Social Development](#) that notes how preschool children act out roles and images they see in their daily lives, including those of parents, caregivers and siblings. But if a child is consistently questioning their gender identity, then they may be transgender or nonbinary, he notes.

Amber Briggie, a mom of two from the greater Dallas area, says her transgender son Max told her that he was a boy at age 2. "Max has always identified as a boy," she says. "He told me using his own words when he was 2. We were coming home from preschool one day, and he said, 'Mom, I'm not a girl, I'm a boy, and I like Spider-Man.'"

Briggie made space for Max's gender expression, which meant wearing boys' clothes and cutting his hair short. Then, when he was around 7 years old and contending with the highly gendered space that is elementary school, Max began acting up at school and at home. Briggie reacted by listening to her child and following his lead. She initiated a conversation about his pronouns and who he is. Max said, "I'm a boy. Call me your son. I want to use the boy's bathroom at school."

"From a young age, he was showing me and telling me what he needed," says Briggie. "Once I made the space for that to happen, almost overnight he became his happy, goofy, outgoing, confident, loving, cuddly self again. There were no more outbursts. And his health improved because he was no longer living with constant anxiety and stress."

Is it normal for kids to question their gender/try on different gender identities?

Stolove says that it is normal for children to play with gender expression and, for some, to question their gender identity, and this alone does not mean a child is transgender or nonbinary. "This will usually be situation-specific, such as a child assigned male at birth enjoys pretend play as the mom and or dressing up as a mom," he explains. "Or a girl might enjoy pretending to play a male character from a story she is interested in."

At what age can kids know their gender identity/know they are trans?

Children begin to develop their sense of self early on, and gender identity is part of that, says Stolove.

Victoria Genetin, who holds her doctorate in women's, gender and sexuality studies and is the assistant director, diversity equity and inclusion at the University of Michigan, saw how quickly her 6-year-old named Augustus developed their gender identity. "Around 18 months, Augustus started saying that they were a girl," explains Genetin. "At 2.5-3, they said, 'I'm not a boy or a girl, I'm just Augus.' By the time they were 4.5-5, they said, 'I'm neither. I'm not a boy, I'm not a girl,' preferring to use they/them or she/her as pronouns."

[Dr. Marci Bowers](#), of Burlingame, California, a pelvic and gynecologic surgeon and the first woman worldwide to hold a personal transgender history while performing transgender surgery says adult patients who come for gender-affirming surgeries later in life report early gender cross-sex identification in 90% of cases, possibly more, most prior to age 6. The takeaway here, according to Bowers: "Kids know."

What are some signs a parent can look to, which may tell them their child may be transgender or questioning their gender?

Stolove suggests talking openly about gender with children early on. "You can explain from an early age that it's possible to be a boy, a girl or neither; that way a child knows that they can be the one to tell you who they are," he says. "If a child feels that talking about gender is something normal in their family, they will feel safer discussing who they are with you, and will go through the questioning process with you."

Stolove emphasizes one-on-one communication as well, noting that parents can always ask their child if they feel like a boy, a girl or neither.

[Kryss Shane](#), a licensed master social worker and leading transgender youth expert says that children might communicate their identity in a variety of ways. "Some ask for a bathing suit that matches a gender they weren't assigned at birth," she notes. "Some have questions about when their genitalia will change to match who they are. Others may become angry or upset when forced to dress as a gender they do not identify with. Be accepting and supportive, and the child will tell you everything."

Is a child trans if they constantly say, "I'm not a boy/girl, I'm a girl/boy?"

As parents listen to their children, they might wonder how much weight to put into a definitive statement like, "I am not a girl, I'm a boy" (or vice versa), given that kids do experiment with various aspects of gender.

Stolove says that a statement like this might mean a child is transgender, but it also might mean they are exploring who they are and what they feel. "You are listening to them to see if this is an insistent, consistent and persistent pattern and if it is, they might be trans," he notes.

How can parents best support their child if they think their child might be trans, gender nonconforming or nonbinary?

Experts and parents agree that the most important way parents can [support their children](#) is by showing them unconditional love and making space for them to be themselves. Here are a few specific action steps you can take:

Allow room for gender expression. "If they want to wear certain clothes or have their hair a particular way, just let them know that is acceptable and great," says Stolove.

Discuss gender identity. "If you think your child might be transgender, nonbinary or gender-nonconforming, bring these topics up in casual conversation in positive ways," suggests Stolove. "You might say over dinner, 'I read a great article about a young trans boy who was helping his school make changes to support the other [trans kids](#) in his school,' and express how great

you think it is. This lets your child know that you are aware of [trans issues](#) and that you are supportive.”

Read on your own and with your child. Books that feature trans children as characters can be great resources for kids and parents. Stolove likes “[When Aiden Became a Brother](#)” or “[I Am Jazz](#),” while Shane’s book “[The Educator’s Guide to LGBT+ Inclusion](#)” includes a list of recommended readings for family members and for kids.

Find your own support. Stolove encourages parents to consider [joining parent support groups](#), like the Ackerman Institute, [PFLAG](#), the [Trans Youth Equality Foundation](#) or [TransFamilies](#). You might also benefit from individual psychotherapy.

The bottom line for parents

No matter how a child’s gender identity might be labeled, parents should try their best to empower them to express themselves in any way that feels good, says Stolove. “In our culture, we all have a great deal of pressure to conform to our gender roles,” he notes. “All of us benefit when we are supported to live more authentically, rather than fit into a cookie cutter idea of what it means to be a man or woman.”

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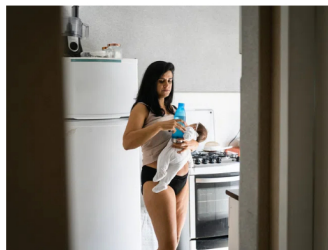
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