

# Understanding and Supporting Gender Identity



Caregivers can do a lot to support the healthy growth of their children. This includes understanding and supporting their child's gender identity.

## WHAT GENDER IS AND ISN'T

*What gender is and how it emerges:*

- Gender is the way society expects boys, girls, men, and women to look and behave.
- Gender norms are cultural and can change over time. For example, in the U.S., girls used to only wear skirts. And women rarely worked outside the home.
- A child's early sense of gender may be rigid. This happens even when gender-neutral or diverse toys are offered. A girl may only want to wear pink. A boy might think a woman with short hair is a man.
- Children learn about gender as they play and explore. Many factors affect gender identity. It's not something caregivers create.
- As toddlers explore, they might play dress-up and role-play without thinking about gender labels. A boy might pretend to be a mom. A girl might dress up as a dad.
- "Cross-gender" play does not mean your child is transgender or gender-diverse.

*What gender isn't:*

- Gender is not the same thing as sex. Sex is usually assigned at birth. Male for babies born with a penis, scrotum, and testes. Female for babies born with a vulva, vagina, and ovaries.

- A small number of babies—less than 2%—are born with genitals that are neither male nor female. This is called intersex.

## HOW TO SUPPORT HEALTHY DEVELOPMENT OF GENDER IDENTITY

Most children grow to identify as the gender of their sex assigned at birth. But some children do not. (In 2022, UCLA researchers estimated that less than 1% of Americans over age 13 identify as transgender.) Sometimes even very young children *insist* that they are neither gender. Or say they are the opposite gender than the one given at birth. Experts recommend supporting what a child says about their gender. This is especially true when they are *consistent* and *persistent* about it.

It is important for caregivers to respect and support their children as they see themselves. This is true even when a child is very young. You might say, “I love you no matter what,” or “You can always share how you feel with me.” Making sure your child feels loved and accepted is crucial for their healthy development. Ask your HealthySteps Specialist if you have any concerns or questions about your child’s gender expression or identity.

### ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

American Academy of Pediatrics  
(English and Spanish)

- [Gender Identity Development in Children](#)
- [Gender-Diverse & Transgender Children](#)
- [Parenting a Gender-Diverse Child: Hard Questions Answered](#)

TSER (Trans Student Education Resources)

- [The Gender Unicorn](#)  
(informational graphic in English, Spanish, Portuguese, Russian, Japanese, German, French, Italian, Thai, Turkish, Dutch, Khmer, Hungarian, Danish, and Icelandic)

SCAN FOR MORE INFO

