



Everyone's welcome



Gender Identity Guide

A guide to supporting children and young people with their gender identity



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Welcome

Every child and young person should have a safe and happy childhood, and the foundations they need to thrive. At Action for Children, we provide practical and emotional care and support, ensure their voices are heard and campaign to bring lasting improvements to their lives.

We want every child and young person to fulfil their potential. They should be able to pursue their interests, enjoy their hobbies, and learn about the world. A century and a half of experience has given us a unique view of the problems children and young people face. Our work draws on a vast wealth of practical knowledge that's constantly being reinforced and reviewed.



Gender identity

Young people have a lot to think about. Exploring their sexual orientation or gender identity should be a positive experience for all young people, including lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans and non-binary young people.

We know that many practitioners are already taking vital steps to make sure the needs of their lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans and non-binary young people are met.

This guide is designed to support practitioners and volunteers. We want to make sure that every lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans and non-binary young person feels supported.

Gender identity and non-binary

There are lots of terms associated with gender identity. You can find some of them in [Appendix 1 – Glossary of terms](#). Don't get too hung up about knowing them all, as the terms are fluid. The most important thing when working with children and young people who are exploring their gender identity is that you take the same action as you do for all children and young people.

What is gender identity?

A person's internal, deeply held sense of their own gender.

What is non-binary?

Some people don't fit into the binary divide. They neither identify as man nor woman, but somewhere in between. Some may also identify as a mix of man and woman.

What is gender fluidity?

This is when people move between gender identities or expressions. Such fluidity may not be permanent.

What do we know?

There are lots of children and young people who don't identify within the 'traditional roles' of society.

We know from our work with young carers, children in care, young people facing homelessness and family support services that an increasing number of children and young people are presenting with a gender identity that's different to when they were born. How children and young people are affected by gender variance or gender non-conformity can differ greatly. Some will go through a difficult time emotionally, while others will not.

Low self-esteem and self-harm can be indicative of a child or young person who is questioning their gender. But they may not know the cause or might have been told not to behave in the way they feel most comfortable. This may mean the young person suppresses how they really feel. People who are questioning their gender are more likely to attempt suicide, so early intervention is key to long-term positive outcomes. It's also important to support young people who don't wish to permanently change their gender role.



How we support children and young people

It isn't easy to know how best to support a young person as they begin to think about who they are.

Finding the best way to make sure they have everything they need to develop and flourish can be tricky, too. This is a new area of work for some staff and it may be one that you don't feel confident addressing. Like all the work we do to support families, it's important to take a non-judgmental and young person centred approach. For many of the children, young people and parents you work with, this will also be a new experience. It's important to remember that everyone will have a unique set of needs.

As a practitioner, you can increase your knowledge by listening to the child or young person, discussing issues with your manager, talking with the Gender Identity Champion for your nation*, and doing research online.

*The Gender Identity Champion (GIC) covers a geographical area of Action for Children and will be the named contact for staff.



A lack of experience shouldn't stop you from offering support in the same way you do for any other child or young person.

Every child will face challenges but, if we support them early, they can better deal with their problems. Early help makes a real difference and every child deserves it. We can give them the support they need before they get into difficulties. It's simple and it works.

Staff should consider the following when supporting gender diverse young people:

Names and pronouns



A young person may change their name and the pronoun they use. Some may wish to change their pronoun from 'he' to 'she' or vice versa. Others, for example a non-binary young person, may prefer a pronoun that doesn't relate to male or female gender, such as 'they' or 'zir'.

A young person may want to be known by this preferred name and pronoun within your service. In which case, both will need to be used consistently by you and your team. **It's important to listen to how a young person wants their name and pronoun shared, and with whom.**

Help the young person to understand the impact of sharing their new pronouns and how some people may react. You can build their confidence so they're comfortable sharing these with others, if they like.

A trans young person doesn't need to go through a 'legal' process to be known by their preferred name (and pronoun). But some young people may want to change their name on documents, like a bus pass, passport or bank statements. Any person can change their name by deed poll, although parental consent is required for under 16s. Once changed, passports and bank statements can be amended, and exam certificates will reflect the new name. A young person who wishes to change their gender on a passport and bank statement can do so with a supporting letter from a health practitioner. But the assigned gender will remain on some things, including exam certificates.

Uniform and dress



A trans young person may change how they dress or the uniform they wear to school to reflect their **gender identity**. They are more likely to feel comfortable in a school where all approved uniform items are available to all young people, regardless of gender. But if there are different uniforms or dress codes for 'male' and 'female' students, a young person should be able to wear the uniform items they feel reflect their self-identified gender. A young person you're working with may ask you to help them tell their school.

Toilets and changing rooms



A trans young person may wish to use the toilets and changing rooms of their self-identified gender rather than of their assigned sex. They should be supported to do so. Services should be made aware that this is a legal requirement under the Equality Act. Services should also support trans young people to use gender neutral facilities or a private space if that's what they prefer. The most important thing is to talk to the young person to find out what they want to do.

Sports



A trans young person should be able to play in sports teams that are consistent with their gender identity, unless there are reasonable safety concerns. This is unlikely for most sports and age groups under 18, although staff can get advice from sporting bodies. Playing in a different sports team or deciding which team to play in may be a daunting step for a young person. Staff should approach this sensitively and with care, particularly when supporting a **non-binary** young person.

Residential trips



Before you book a venue, check whether it has gender neutral areas. Make sure trans young people can sleep in a gender-neutral dorm or private space if that's what makes them feel comfortable. Trips overseas may need more planning. Some aspects may cause worry or concern for a trans young person. This may include their documentation not corresponding to their self-identified gender, or how they look. Staff should talk to the young person at the earliest opportunity.

Body anxieties



A trans young person may feel unhappy or distressed about living with a body they don't feel reflects their gender identity. We can help. We can make sure young people know where to find support and who to talk to. And we can also help to boost their self-esteem and body confidence.



Extra support

Being trans isn't a mental health issue. But worries about discrimination or distressing feelings to do with their **gender identity** may mean that some trans young people struggle. A trans young person may want to talk to someone if they have started to transition or if they are confused or unhappy about their gender identity. Staff can help by providing pastoral support.

They can also suggest counselling or therapy services (see the list of support agencies in [Appendix 1](#)). It's important to find a mental health professional who understands gender identity and the experiences of trans young people. It's also important to remember that you're the adult the young person trusts so, as with any other issue, simply listening and providing basic support is still really important. You don't need to be an expert to make a difference – you'll learn by listening.

Getting it wrong

If you make a mistake – like using the wrong name or pronoun – it's important to acknowledge it. The best thing to do is apologise to the young person and anybody else present, correct yourself and move on. It's also important to help colleagues by correcting them, too, so that everyone is working together. If staff use the preferred name and pronoun of the trans young person all the time, rather than only when in the presence of the trans young person, it will help.

Other things to consider

Every young person needs different things to feel comfortable. A young person's needs may change, or new situations may come up, so staff will need to take a flexible approach to support.

A young person who's already transitioned will need support in these areas.

Lots of things in our services are separated by gender, including toilets, changing rooms and, sometimes, uniforms. Services may need to make changes where this is the case, to make sure a trans young person feels safe and comfortable. This may include, for example, providing toilets that are not gender specific. Remember that some young people don't identify as 'male' or 'female', or may not feel happy using either 'male' or 'female' facilities. Many organisations are taking steps to provide gender neutral facilities – irrespective of whether there are trans young people in the school or college – to create a more inclusive environment for everyone.



Children and young people with additional needs

Some children and young people may need extra support to understand and accept their identity. They may also want to learn about people who are different to them, and understand that difference should be respected and celebrated.

A child or young person with additional needs is just as likely to question their gender identity as any other person. Make sure a child or young person's words or actions aren't automatically attributed to their additional learning needs. For example, clothing types or hair length shouldn't just be seen as a sensory need, or behaviours described as a new special interest, fascination, curiosity or phase. While these may be true, it's important to listen without judgment so that any expressions questioning gender identity aren't dismissed.

It's hard to understand and express emotions related to gender identity. But it can be even more difficult for people with communication difficulties. Some children and young people with additional needs may not see the need to communicate or understand that others don't see them in the same way as they see themselves. This could obviously lead to increased frustration and anxiety. It could also have a negative impact on wellbeing and mental health. Offering one-to-one support will give the young person time and space to explore issues in a non-judgmental way.



How we support parents, carers and the wider family

Parents, carers and other family members may struggle with their child's gender identity questions.

Practitioners need to help parents to understand and respect their young person's gender identity. A failure to understand their child's needs may lead to a safeguarding concern. For example, if a parent causes their child emotional distress.

It's important to listen to the child or young person, and to assess the impact of family life on their wellbeing and safety. As with any other family difficulties, you'll be skilled in working with families to sort out problems. With their consent, work closely with the child or young person's school or college to reduce any negative experiences.

There are lots of websites that offer specific support for parents, carers and the wider family (see [Appendix 2](#)). Some areas have support groups for parents, too.

Confidentiality

A person's status as **trans** is private. They may not want to share information, like the details of their transition, with others. Staff should act professionally and respect confidentiality.

Help the young person to think about how much they feel comfortable disclosing to others. Staff may have to share information where there is a safeguarding concern. Where possible, staff should talk to the young person about why this information needs to be shared and the specific details that will be passed on. These may include their preferred name and **pronoun**, for example. Staff should respect the young people and help them to decide how much they feel comfortable sharing with others. This includes sharing things with friends and family.

Safeguarding

Safeguarding is at the heart of everything we do. Keeping children, young people and vulnerable adults safe is of paramount importance.

We follow Action for Children's policies and procedures, which are part of our Safeguarding Framework.



When working with transgender, non-binary or people exploring their gender identity, it's important to remember that the usual safeguarding processes apply. Like any other safeguarding concern, staff should assess the risk in a child centred way. We should always listen to the child and make sure that any safeguarding action we take doesn't knowingly place them at greater risk of harm.

Practitioners should also be aware of the risk of emotional and physical abuse. In some cases, gender identity denial can lead to a parent or carer physically abusing their child.

We want to improve life for the most vulnerable children, young people and adults. We do this by offering specialist help that protects children, promotes opportunity and prevents problems. We also step in early when concerns arise.

We support people in lots of different ways, all over the UK. We run specialist services for families, support children with disabilities, and help looked after children and young people. We may have contact with children and young people who: only use universal services; who don't use universal services; children in need – those in receipt of statutory services; children in need of protection; and looked after children and young people. We also work with vulnerable adults.

We have a duty to safeguard and promote the welfare of children and young people. We do this in partnership with parents and carers, and other agencies.

The primary responsibility for keeping children and young people safe rests with parents and carers. Our services can help them to look after the wellbeing of their children and young people, and keep them safe. But there are times when a referral may need to be made to statutory services, to make sure vulnerable people are safe.

Everyone who works for Action for Children has a responsibility to keep children safe and look after their wellbeing. We are all responsible for the quality, efficiency and effectiveness of our work.

All staff should know the safeguarding duty in our Code of Conduct:

“All workers have a duty and shared responsibility to safeguard and promote the wellbeing of children and young people, by being responsible for the quality, efficiency and effectiveness of their work. To reinforce this, the principles of safeguarding children and young people are embedded in each section of this Code.”

Everyone should also be aware of any locally-agreed procedures. If these differ from Action for Children’s procedures, local steps should be followed in tandem.

- In Northern Ireland, refer to the [Safeguarding Board for Northern Ireland website](#).
- In Wales, refer to the [All Wales Child Protection Procedures](#).
- In England, refer to the [Department for Education website](#).
- In Scotland, refer to the [Scottish government website](#).

Staff should understand the role of the local statutory safeguarding service. They should also know how to contact them. This includes social work and children’s services.

Staff should also be aware of NSPCC resources, like Childline. This is a free and confidential service for children and young people.

www.childline.org.uk

Tel: 0800 1111

What we do at Action for Children

We have gender identity champions in every country. They informally support colleagues. We also have an award-winning Celebrate LGBT+ staff network and take part in Pride events all over the UK. Lots of our staff and volunteers wear a rainbow lanyard, and we celebrate key LGBT+ days and events, including LGBT History Month.



Appendix 1

Glossary of terms

A

Ally

A (typically) straight and/or cis person who supports members of the LGBT+ community.

Ace

Ace is an umbrella term used to describe a variation in levels of romantic and/or sexual attraction, including a lack of attraction. Ace people may describe themselves using one or more of a wide variety of terms, including, but not limited to, asexual, aromantic, demis and grey-As.

B

Bi

Bi is an umbrella term used to describe a romantic and/or sexual orientation towards more than one gender.

Bi people may describe themselves using one or more of a wide variety of terms, including, but not limited to, bisexual, pan, queer, and other non-monosexual identities.

Biphobia

The fear or dislike of someone who identifies as bi based on prejudice or negative attitudes, beliefs or views

about bi people. Biphobic bullying may be targeted at people who are, or who are perceived to be, bi.

C

Cisgender or Cis

Someone whose gender identity is the same as the sex they were assigned at birth. Non-trans is also used by some people.

Coming out

When a person first tells someone/ others about their identity as lesbian, gay, bi or trans.

D

Deadnaming

Calling someone by their birth name after they have changed their name. This term is often associated with trans people who have changed their name as part of their transition.

G

Gay

Refers to a man who has a romantic and/or sexual orientation towards men. Also a generic term for lesbian and gay sexuality – some women define themselves as gay rather than lesbian.

Gender

Often expressed in terms of masculinity and femininity, gender is largely culturally determined and is assumed from the sex assigned at birth.

Gender dysphoria

Used to describe when a person experiences discomfort or distress because there is a mismatch between their sex assigned at birth and their gender identity. This is also the clinical diagnosis for someone who doesn't feel comfortable with the sex they were assigned at birth.

Gender expression

How a person chooses to outwardly express their gender, within the context of societal expectations of gender. A person who does not confirm to societal expectations of gender may not, however, identify as trans.

Gender identity

A person's innate sense of their own gender, whether male, female or something else (see non-binary below), which may or may not correspond to the sex assigned at birth.

Gender reassignment

Another way of describing a person's transition. To undergo gender reassignment usually means some sort of medical intervention, but it can also mean changing names, pronouns, dressing differently and living in their self-identified gender.

Gender reassignment is a characteristic that's protected by the Equality Act 2010, and it's further interpreted in the Equality Act 2010 approved code of practice. It's a term of much contention and one that Stonewall's [Trans Advisory Group](#) feels should be reviewed.

Gender Recognition Certificate (GRC)

This enables trans people to be legally recognised in their affirmed gender and to be issued with a new birth certificate. Not all trans people will apply for a GRC and you currently have to be over 18 to apply. You do not need a GRC to change your gender markers at work or to legally change your gender on other documents such as your passport.

Gillick competence

A term used in medical law to decide whether a child (under 16) is able to consent to their own medical treatment, without the need for parental permission or knowledge.

H**Heterosexual (straight)**

Refers to a man who has a romantic and/or sexual orientation towards women or to a woman who has a romantic and/or sexual orientation towards men.

Homosexual

This might be considered a more medical term used to describe someone who has a romantic and/or sexual orientation towards someone of the same gender. The term 'gay' is now more generally used.

Homophobia

The fear or dislike of someone, based on prejudice or negative attitudes, beliefs or views about lesbian, gay or bi people. Homophobic bullying may be targeted at people who are, or who are perceived to be, lesbian, gay or bi.

I

Intersex

A term used to describe a person who may have the biological attributes of both sexes or whose biological attributes do not fit with societal assumptions about what constitutes male or female. Intersex people may identify as male, female or non-binary.

Stonewall works with intersex groups to give its partners and stakeholders information about areas of disadvantage experienced by intersex people. But it does not, after discussions with members of the intersex community, include intersex issues as part of its current remit at this stage.

L

LGBT+

The acronym for lesbian, gay, bi and trans.

Lesbian

Refers to a woman who has a romantic and/or sexual orientation towards women.

N

Neurodiverse

A concept where neurological differences are recognised and respected in the same way as any other human difference.

Non-binary

An umbrella term for people whose gender identity doesn't sit comfortably with 'man' or 'woman'. Non-binary identities are varied and can include people who identify with some aspects of binary identities, while others reject them entirely.

O

Outed

When a lesbian, gay, bi or trans person's sexual orientation or gender identity is disclosed to someone else without their consent.

P

Person with a trans history

Someone who identifies as male or female or a man or woman, but was assigned the opposite sex at birth. This is increasingly used by people to acknowledge a trans past.

Pan

Refers to a person whose romantic and/or sexual attraction towards others is not limited by sex or gender.

Passing

If someone is regarded, at a glance, to be a cisgender man or cisgender woman.

Cisgender refers to someone whose gender identity matches the sex they were 'assigned' at birth. This might include physical gender cues (hair or clothing) and/or behaviour that is historically or culturally associated with a particular gender.

Pronoun

Words we use to refer to people's gender in conversation – for example, 'he' or 'she'. Some people may prefer others to refer to them in gender neutral language and use pronouns such as they/their and ze/zir.

Q

Queer

Queer is a term used by those wanting to reject specific labels of romantic orientation, sexual orientation and/or

gender identity. It can also be a way of rejecting the perceived norms of the LGBT+ community (racism, sizeism, ableism, etc). Although some LGBT+ people view the word as a slur, it was reclaimed in the late 1980s by the queer community.

Questioning

The process of exploring your own sexual orientation and/or gender identity.

S

Sex

Assigned to a person on the basis of primary sex characteristics (genitalia) and reproductive functions. Sometimes the terms 'sex' and 'gender' are interchanged to mean 'male' or 'female'.

Sexual orientation

A person's romantic and/or sexual attraction to another person.

T

Trans

An umbrella term to describe people whose gender is not the same as, or does not sit comfortably with, the sex they were assigned at birth. Trans people may describe themselves using one or more of a wide variety of terms, including (but not limited to) transgender, transsexual, gender-queer (GQ), gender-fluid, non-binary, gender-variant, crossdresser,

genderless, agender, nongender, third gender, bi-gender, trans man, trans woman, trans masculine, trans feminine and neutrois.

Transgender man

A term used to describe someone who is assigned female at birth but identifies and lives as a man. This may be shortened to trans man, or FTM, an abbreviation for female-to-male.

Transgender woman

A term used to describe someone who is assigned male at birth but identifies and lives as a woman. This may be shortened to trans woman, or MTF, an abbreviation for male-to-female.

Transitioning

The steps a trans person may take to live in the gender with which they identify. Each person's transition will involve different things. For some this involves medical intervention, such as hormone therapy and surgeries, but not all trans people want or are able to have this.

Transitioning also might involve things such as telling friends and family, dressing differently and changing official documents.

Transphobia

The fear or dislike of someone based on the fact they are trans, including the denial/refusal to accept their gender identity.

Transsexual

This was used in the past as a more medical term (similarly to homosexual) to refer to someone whose gender is not the same as, or does not sit comfortably with, the sex they were assigned at birth.

This term is still used by some although many people prefer the term trans or transgender.

Appendix 2

Support services

Organisations that offer free online learning and support resources

CEOP

Child Exploitation online: www.thinkuknow.co.uk/professionals/our-views/how-to-support-lgbt-young-people-to-stay-safe-online/

Support on the new relationships and sex education (RSE) curriculum.

Childline

Really helpful guidance and video chats.

The [Childline message boards](#) are also a good way to get support. They show how other young people are dealing with similar situations.

Childline annual review 2015-16: learning.nspcc.org.uk/media/1373/childline-annual-review-2015-16.pdf

Other resources to support transgender young people: www.childline.org.uk/info-advice/your-feelings/sexual-identity/transgender-identity/

NSPCC

Provides services and resources to support all children.

Resources of interest that cover issues relating to the abuse of young women and girls, and the experiences of transgender young people:

“Is this sexual abuse?” A report about children’s experiences of peer sexual abuse: learning.nspcc.org.uk/research-resources/2018/is-this-sexual-abuse/

Several organisations can put you in touch with people who support young LGBT+ people

Stonewall has a section on their website called ‘[What’s in my area](#)’. Here you can find local groups and organisations near you.

LGBT+YouthScotland

Resources, posters and guidance can be found at: www.lgbtyouth.org.uk

This is Scotland's national charity for LGBT+ young people, working with 13 to 25-year-olds across the country. The charity also delivers the LGBT+ Charter programme in schools, organisations and businesses.

Other resources

There are a multitude of useful research resources in the UK, including:

- The Stonewall School [Report](#) 2017.
- The LGBT Youth Scotland [Report](#).
- International evidence, including the following reported in this recent GayStar News [article](#).
- [The Samaritans](#).

Butterfly – an ITV drama – embraces the story of a three-generational family and exposes the truly extraordinary demands made by everyone. Across three episodes, viewers see how they all prosper or fall as challenges unfold over time. Find out more: www.mermaidsuk.org.uk/butterfly.html

Mermaids is a support group for gender variant children and teenagers, and their families. Their goal is to relieve the mental and emotional stress of young people under 19 who are affected by gender identity issues. Mermaids also helps families and educates the public. Find out more: www.mermaidsuk.org.uk

Tel: 0808 801 0400 (Monday to Friday, 9am–9pm)

Email: info@mermaidsuk.org.uk

SEND Support – special educational needs and disability consultant and trainer, explores how best to support trans or gender questioning autistic pupils in schools and gives advice and practical support. Find out more: network.autism.org.uk/knowledge/insight-opinion/supporting-trans-and-gender-questioning-autistic-pupils

Email: joebutler@sendsupport.co.uk

Support in Northern Ireland

<https://nonbinaryni.wordpress.com/resources-links/>

Safe and happy childhood



Action for Children protects and supports children and young people, providing practical and emotional care and support, ensuring their voices are heard, and campaigning to bring lasting improvements to their lives.

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