

## Supporting Transgender Young People :



### What is gender?

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Is gender just a matter of being male or female? Is gender about the way you look and dress? Or is it also about how you see yourself and how that affects you? Gender is a combination of all these components.

Gender is defined and evaluated all around us. There are words that are associated with being a boy and others that are associated with being a girl. There are clothes that boys are expected to wear, and clothes girls are expected to wear. There are sports that are considered “boys” sports and sports that are considered “girls” sports.

Students who are gender non-conforming are those whose gender expression (or outward appearance) does not follow traditional gender roles: “feminine boys”, “masculine girls”, and students who are androgynous, for example. It can also include students who look the way boys and girls are expected to look but participate in activities that are gender non-conforming, like a boy who does ballet. The term “transgender young people” can be used as an umbrella term of all students whose gender identity is different from the sex they were assigned at birth and/or whose gender expression is non-stereotypical. Some transgender students’ transition or change from one gender to another. Transition often means changing the way you dress, selecting a new name, and sometimes getting help from a doctor to change your body.

How are transgender and other gender non-conforming young people treated at school?

In addition to the typical challenges faced by all students, those who are transgender and/or gender non-conforming must also be ready to survive slurs, bullying harassment, and assaults by fellow students and even teachers. Instead of creating safe spaces for gender non-conforming and transgender students, school administrators often enforce policies and practices that can punish gender non-conforming and transgender young people simply for being who they are. Examples of discrimination based on gender identity, appearance, and behaviour include: refusing to allow students to wear clothing that fits their gender identity, denying students access to education or extra-curricular opportunities due to their actual or perceived gender identity and/or expression, and a school’s failure to protect students from harassment based on their actual or perceived gender identity and/or expression. Since a common form of discrimination against transgender students is not being allowed to use their preferred toilet, schools should consider providing non-gendered single stalled bathrooms.

### **Harassment:**

Students who are transgender or gender non-conforming often face persistent and severe harassment that can involve name-calling, threats of violence, sexual innuendos or sexual harassment, and even physical assault. Students who are gender non-conforming and/or transgender are often thought to be gay, bisexual, or lesbian

(even if they do not identify as any of these), which increases the harassment, and/or discrimination that they experience. This is because gender discrimination and harassment is often rooted in homophobia, as gender and sexual orientation are seen as interconnected. However, this interconnectedness needs to be challenged to remove the myths that exist around gender and sexual orientation issues being similar.

### **Names and pronouns:**

Recognising and validating the names and pronouns that correspond to transgender students' gender identity is important for their emotional health and well being. A student's name appears in a large variety of places – student's records, IDs, class roll-call, school publications, tests, and homework assignments to name just a few. Many transgender students adopt new names that are essential to their identity. They also may request that they be referred to by the pronoun that corresponds, or most closely corresponds, with their gender identity. It is important that these requests be respected.

Some gender non-conforming students do not change their name or ask to be referred to by a different pronoun. Even for these students, however, names and pronouns can still be used to discriminate against them. For example, some gender non-conforming students are teased through the use of the wrong pronoun or variations of their names. For example, a boy called Juan who is perceived to be effeminate is called "Juanita" to express other students' beliefs that he is not acting as the boy "is supposed to act". This type of name-calling or the misuse of an appropriate name or pronoun can be very damaging to a student's ability to fully engage in, and feel safe at school.

### **Sex segregation:**

Many school environments and some school activities are sex segregated. Examples include toilets, some physical education activities, some class projects, and some student activities. Such segregation can cause difficulties for transgender students if they are not allowed access to these facilities or activities that match their gender identity.

Not only can such a denial affect students' emotional well-being, but in some cases it can also affect their physical well-being. For instance, if transgender students are denied access to the toilet that corresponds with their gender identity, they might avoid using the toilet at school altogether. This can lead to many physical and emotional health problems and can also create an incentive for the student to disengage from school.

Sex segregation can be especially difficult for transgender students who do not identify as either male or female. If such a student is only presented with the choice of a male or female toilet, the student is forced to make a choice that does not match their gender identity. And often times such a "choice" is meaningless because the student is harassed by other students regardless of whether the student opts to use the male or the female toilet.

Harassment in toilets is a common form of discrimination against gender non-conforming students. Because of Transphobia and sex stereotyping, these students are regularly subjected to verbal and physical harassment in toilets. Therefore, it is important that schools take steps to make sure that toilets and other sex-segregated spaces be made accessible and safe for students who are transgender and/or gender non-conforming.

**Dress codes:**

Enforcement of dress codes is often a source of discrimination. For example, it would be discriminatory for a school to have a dress code that is different for boys and girls and refuse to allow a transgender student to wear clothing consistent with their gender identity. Such disciplinary action can negatively affect the student's standing in the school. In addition, transgender and gender non-conforming students are sometimes held to a different standard than other students. For example, the clothes of young transgender women are often scrutinized more closely than the clothes of other young women. A skirt that is considered "appropriate" when worn by a biological girl is called "inappropriate" when it is worn by a transgender student. Similarly, gender non-conforming students sometimes face harassment or are scrutinised because their clothes are considered "too feminine" or "too masculine".