

So, some of this sounds a little like my child; what should I do?

It can be hard on a child to be different. Society as a whole, and even other children, can be ruthless when a child steps outside the gender norms. Be sure your child knows how much you love them, however they express or identify their gender. Find other families with children like yours, so your child will not feel alone and “different.” Read books about other gender expansive children. Educate yourself about gender and find support for yourself and the other adults in your child’s life.

Learn More and Find Support

Websites

1. PFLAG pflag.org The extended family of the LGBTQ community
2. Family Acceptance Project familyproject.sfsu.edu
3. Gay, Lesbian, Straight Education Network glsen.org
4. Gender Spectrum, genderspectrum.org, Education, training and support to help create a gender sensitive and inclusive environment for all children and teens

Books

1. *Gender Born, Gender Made*, by Diane Ehrensaft
2. *The Transgender Child* and *The Transgender Teen*, by Stephanie Brill and Rachel Pepper

PFLAG National

If you’d like more information, please email us at: info@pflag.org or to find a PFLAG chapter near you visit us at: pflag.org

Your Local PFLAG Chapter

Across Maryland: www.pflagMD.org

Howard County and Baltimore: www.pflagHoCo.org

We offer support and education for parents and families, training for day care providers, schools and churches, and youth groups for children 12-21. There is also a local play group for gender expansive little ones, where they can relax and be themselves, and you can find fellowship with other parents.



Gender and Children

Are You Wondering about Your Child’s Gender Expression?



PFLAG Howard County, and PFLAG Baltimore, Maryland
www.pflagHoCo.org

Our Gender Expansive Children

Gender expression is a person's way of expressing their gender. Gender expression may be a new term for you, but if you think about it, we all express our gender in many ways. Through the clothes we chose, how we wear our hair, etc. And right around age 2-3, our children start expressing their own ideas about how to present themselves: what they like to wear, what toys they prefer, whether they see themselves as a mommy or a daddy when they play grown-ups.

Sometimes our toddlers express their gender in a way that surprises or concerns us. However your child is expressing gender, it need not be a cause for shame or fear. More and more of our children are expressing themselves outside of the traditional, "accepted" behavior for boys or girls. It is simply how our children show the world who they are and how they feel inside.

If you have a toddler whose gender expression is unconventional, you may have some questions and concerns. We hope to address those here.

What does "gender nonconforming" or "gender expansive" mean?

These terms describe children who express their gender in ways that are non-traditional, according to current societal norms. Society establishes expectations for how children express their gender. Some toddlers don't fit into those expectations. Societal norms regarding gender roles change over time, so gender nonconformity changes over time as well. Think of the days when girls were expected to only wear dresses and not play sports.

Can a parent change a child's gender expression?

Because of concerns about bullying, many parents redirect or attempt to modify a toddler's gender nonconforming behavior and expression. And this can seem to work, but mental health experts urge against it. Our children are healthiest when they are able to express their gender naturally. Because of the stigma still attached to gender nonconformity, many toddlers and youth who attempt to express and communicate what they experience internally receive negative messages from family, friends, teachers, society, etc. Those messages can cause many youth to repress their gender expression, which often leads to internalized feeling of shame, guilt and self-hatred, which can be carried into adulthood.

If a toddler is gender expansive does that mean they're gay or lesbian?

It might. But keep in mind, gender expression is not the same thing as sexual orientation (who you are emotionally and physically attracted to). Toddlers who are gender expansive may grow up to be gay, straight or bisexual, just like the rest of the population.

Can being gender expansive be just a phase of childhood?

Most toddlers experience varying degrees of gender nonconformity. They experiment with behaviors that don't conform to society's gender stereotypes. We've all seen young boys who go through a phase of playing dress up or with dolls, or young girls who refuse to wear dresses and want to play with trucks. Many of our children outgrow these behaviors and find themselves relatively comfortable in their expected gender roles. But some of our children don't outgrow these behaviors. These children may be gender expansive their whole lives, or they may come to understand themselves to be what we adults call "transgender."

Most toddlers who are gender nonconforming (or gender expansive) grow out of it. Some do not and remain gender nonconforming all their lives. A few will come to understand themselves as transgender.

What does transgender mean?

People who are transgender feel a deep, consistent, persistent sense of gender that doesn't match the gender they were assigned at birth. Our gender is fixed in our brains at birth and sometimes what our brain tells us we are (male, female, or feeling a bit of both or neither) doesn't match how the doctor identified us. Some of our children understand this about themselves at a very early age. For others it may not become clear until they are teens or older.

Can a person "outgrow" being transgender?

Some people may have fluid (or flexible) feelings about their internal sense of gender (maleness or femaleness). But for people who have a consistent and persistent identity that differs from the one they were assigned, it does not go away with time. In fact, the feelings become harder and harder to ignore or hide as a person grows.