Gender expression is a person's way of expressing gender. It may be a new term for you, but if you think about it, we all express our gender in various ways: through the clothes we choose, how we wear our hair, etc.

Gender identity is our internal sense of gender (as a male or a female, or someone who feels like they are a bit of both, or perhaps not quite either; some youth prefer the term "queer"). For some, our gender identity is solid; we came into the world very clear about our gender and express it with confidence. Others are more gender fluid and creative in our expression. In the age of the internet, more of our youth are feeling empowered to explore their gender expression and identity outside of the traditional, "accepted" parameters.

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

These terms describe people who express their gender in ways that are outside current societal expectations for how we "should" express it. Some of us don't fit those expectations. Societal norms change over time, so gender nonconformity changes over time as well. Think of the days when girls only wore dresses or when men did not wear earrings.

Can this be just a phase of youth?

Most youth experience varying degrees of gender nonconformity, experimenting with behaviors and expressions. Many outgrow these and find themselves relatively comfortable in their expected gender roles. But some of our children don't. External messages—from society, friends and family—can delay a young person's readiness to accept their own gender differences.

What does "transgender" mean?

People who are transgender feel a deep and persistent sense of gender that doesn't match what they were assigned at birth. Our gender is fixed in our brains and sometimes what our brain tells us doesn't match how the doctor identified us. Some children understand this about themselves at a very early age. For others it may not become clear until they are teens or even adults.

Can we change a youth's gender expression or gender identity?

No amount of redirection, behavior modification or even punishment can change a person's internal sense of their gender. Because of the stigma still attached to gender nonconformity, many trans and gender nonconforming youth receive negative messages from society, teachers, friends and even family. Those messages can cause many youth to repress their gender identity. In additional, those messages can lead to internalized feelings of shame, guilt and self-hatred, and have dangerous consequences.

According to the American Psychological Association, the American Academy of Pediatrics and the American Medical Association, attempts to change a child's gender identity are ineffective and can be psychologically damaging.

Many of our young people develop depression, anxiety, chemical dependence, self-harming behaviors and even suicidality (about 40% of trans children attempt suicide before they turn 18). Other youth, who refuse to--or simply cannot--repress their true gender identity or nonconformity may become ostracized from their families and experience bullying in school. They may run away or be thrown out of their home, which increases chances that they may become victims of hate crimes.

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

Gender expression is not the same as sexual orientation (who you are emotionally and physically attracted to). Transgender or gender expansive youth may be gay, straight or bisexual, just like the rest of the population.

What happens to these children at puberty?

Youth who transition or are deeply questioning and are in the early stages of puberty can be given hormone blockers, (which are completely reversible) and which can temporarily stop puberty, giving the youth and the family additional time to explore and process their options.

Which restrooms do trans youth use?

They use the restroom that matches their internal sense of gender and the gender in which they live and express. Some of our youth prefer to use a family-friendly or gender neutral bathroom.

Can youth have transgender-related surgery?

In some cases, where the young person's identity is insistent, persistent and consistent, and with consent from legal guardians and a mental health professional, these youth can have surgery before they turn 18.

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

It can be hard on a young person to be different. Society as a whole, and even other youth, can be ruthless when someone 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 youth. 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* Parents, families, friends and allies united with LGBT people
2. Family Acceptance Project *familyproject.sfsu.edu*
3. Gay, Lesbian, Straight Education Network *glsen.org*
4. Gender Spectrum, *genderspectrum.org,* provides 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,* 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

Howard County and Baltimore
www.pflagmd.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.

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Gender and Youth

Is your child is struggling with gender?

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